Empty Cloud: The Teachings of Xu (Hsu) Yun

A Remembrance of the Great Chinese Zen Master

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REMEMBERING MASTER XU YUN

by Chan Master Jy Din Shakya



Ven. Master Jy Din Shakya
with Rev. Ming Zhen Shakya

The Master's name, Xu Yun, is translated into English as "Empty Cloud", a translation which often confuses people. We all know what a cloud is, but what, we wonder, is meant by "empty"?

In Chan (pronounced Jen) or Zen literature the term "empty" appears so often and with so many variations of definition, that I will begin by trying to clarify its meaning.

To be empty means to be empty of ego, to be without any thought of self, not in the sense that one functions as a vegetable or a wild animal - living things which merely process water, food and sunlight in order to grow and reproduce - but in the sense that one ceases to gauge the events, the persons, the places, and the things of one's environment in terms of "I" or "me" or "mine". A person who is "empty of self" seldom has occasion even to use these pronouns.

Let me be more specific. We have all heard about a parent, or friend, or lover who claims to be completely unselfish in his love for another. A husband will say, "I kept nothing for myself. I gave everything to her, my wife." This man is not empty. He has merely projected a part of his identity upon another person.

A person who is truly empty possesses nothing, not even a consciousness of self. His interests lie not with his own needs and desires, for indeed, he is unaware of any such considerations, but only with the welfare of others. He does not evaluate people as being likable or unlikable, worthy or unworthy, or as useful or useless. He neither appreciates nor depreciates anyone. He simply understands that the Great Buddha Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Goodness, dwells within every human being, and it is in the interest of this Buddha Self that he invests himself.

Attaining such emptiness is never easy. An old Chan story illustrates this:

A Chan Master once undertook the instruction of a novice who was having great difficulty in detaching himself from the persons of his former, secular life. "You cannot serve the Dharma until you sever these bonds," said the Master. "You must destroy these possessive relationships! Kill them! Regard them as if they no longer existed!"

The novice asked, "But my parents? Must I slay them, too?"

And the Master replied, "Who are they to be spared?"

"And you, Master," said the novice, "must I kill you, too?"

And the Master smiled and said, "Don't worry. There is not enough of me left for you to get your hands on."

Such a master was Xu Yun. There was not enough of him left for anyone to grasp. In 1940 the Japanese Imperial Air Force bombed Nan Hua Monastery in which he sat meditating; but they could not get their hands on him. In 1951, when he was an old man of ninety-three, cadres of communist thugs beat him repeatedly; but although they broke his bones and did succeed in killing younger, stronger priests, they could not get their hands on him, either. There was not enough of him left for anyone to grasp. How can the Buddha Self be killed? Xu Yun would not die until he was ready to die, until he accomplished the tasks which he had set for himself.

I will tell you about this remarkable man, this Empty Cloud whose presence so defined my life. I will tell you things that I remember and I will do my best to transmit to you his Dharma teachings. Perhaps if you learn from him you will be able to experience some of the joy I knew from knowing him.

To be in Xu Yun's presence was to be in the morning mist of a sunny day, or in one of those clouds that linger at the top of a mountain. A person can reach out and try to grab the mist, but no matter how hard he tries to snatch it, his hand always remains empty. Yet, no matter how desiccated his spirit is, the Empty Cloud will envelop it with life-giving moisture; or no matter how his spirit burns with anger or disappointment, a soothing coolness will settle over him, like gentle dew.

This is the Empty Cloud of Xu Yun that still lingers with us. Time and the sun cannot destroy it, for it is the sun, itself; just as it is also eternal.

Now I will tell you some of the history he and I share.

During the 1920's, when I was still a boy, Xu Yun had not yet come to Nan Hua Monastery, the monastery which Hui Neng, the Sixth Patriarch of Chan, had founded near the town of Shao Guan, where I lived. Shao Guan lies about one hundred miles north of Guang Zhou (Canton) in Guang Dong Province, which is in the south of China.

In all the centuries since its founding in 675 AD, Nan Hua Monastery had gone through cycles of neglect and restoration; but when I was a boy, it was definitely in one of its neglected phases. As I can clearly remember, it was much more like a playground than the shrine it is today.

In those days, Shao Guan was a sleepy, little river-town, a place with not much for kids to do. Going out to Nan Hua monastery was our equivalent of a trip to Disneyland.

What made this Monastery playground even more exciting to visit was that no one seemed to be in charge of it. About a hundred monks and a few dozen nuns lived there, but mostly they busied themselves with bickering. Nuns argued with nuns. Monks argued with monks. Nuns argued with monks. And the buildings of this great religious center were merely the places in which all these arguments took place. It didn't seem to matter that the wood was rotting and the stonework was crumbling and the ironwork of the old red and white pagoda was rusting. The decay had merely kept pace with the decline in monastic discipline. Devout Buddhists, like my parents, would visit and put money in the donation boxes; and if the unruly boys they brought with them, like my older brother and me, climbed on ancient structures, or played hide and seek behind the sacred statuary, or ran through hallowed hallways, well, nobody objected. To have restrained us from enjoying ourselves might have restrained the donations. I suppose the monks figured that they already had to suffer with dilapidated buildings, so why should they risk worsening their problems with financial shortages.

So we always had a good time whenever we went to Nan Hua. We'd run across the Caoxi (Ts'ao Xi) River bridge and climb one of the nearby mountains in which there was a natural stone niche. The Sixth Patriarch was said to have meditated in this niche. We'd sit in it and laugh, imitating his pious posture.

No wonder that the Sixth Patriarch appeared to Xu Yun in a vision and begged him to go to Nan Hua Monastery to straighten out the mess it had become!

I didn't meet Xu Yun until 1934 when I was seventeen years old and he was in his sixties. He looked then just like the photograph I have reproduced at the beginning of the text. I'll tell you about this meeting. But in order to appreciate it, you'll need to know a little more of my background.

My family name is Feng. Originally my family came from FuJian Province, but my father moved to Shao Guan and that is where my older brother and I were born and raised. By local standards my family was considered rich. My father owned two businesses: a building materials and supply business and a commercial shop in which he sold dried foods such as mushrooms, scallions, and other varieties of vegetables.

I suppose my parents originally hoped that one day my brother would take over one business and I would take over the other. But my brother's talents were not in any of the academic pursuits and my parents soon began to worry about his abilities. When I was four years old I began to study with the private tutors they had engaged to educate him. He was then two years ahead of me. But I learned quickly and began "skipping" grades until I was ahead of my brother. So, at the conclusion of the Six Year Primary School education, although I was two years younger than my brother, I was graduated two years ahead of him.

I then entered Secondary or Intermediate School. The school I attended was named Li Qun which means a school that "encourages people". It was a Roman Catholic school and all the teachers were Catholic priests and nuns. It was considered the best school in the area. But the study of Christianity was more or less optional; and in my case, it was definitely more less than more. All I really cared about was ball playing. If you could throw it, kick it, bounce it, or hit it, I was interested. In Intermediate School that's what I felt most "encouraged" to do.

But I attended to my studies sufficiently to gain admittance to a three-year Education College. I didn't feel much like selling dried vegetables so I thought I'd become a teacher.

And there I was, in 1934, a cocky kid of seventeen... a smart Alec, you'd say, who one holiday went out, as usual, to Nan Hua Monastery with all the other teen aged boys and girls to have some fun. I had never even heard of Xu Yun and I certainly didn't expect to discover that a holy man had just come to Nan Hua. And there he was...

Something happened to me when I looked into his face. I suddenly dropped to me knees and pressed my forehead against the ground, kowtowing to him. My friends were all astonished. I had never kowtowed to anybody in my life... and there I was, inexplicably, with no suggestion from anyone that I do so, humbling myself before him. Filled with awe and wonder, I kowtowed to Xu Yun three times in succession. The Great Master smiled at me and asked, "Who are you and where are you from?" I barely whispered, "I'm Feng Guo Hua, and I come from Shao Guan." And Xu Yun smiled again and said, "Enjoy yourself here at Nan Hua Temple." He was surrounded by many other monks who looked on silently. I suppose they didn't know what to make of it, either.

Now I couldn't wait until I returned to Nan Hua... but not to have fun... I wanted to see Xu Yun again.

The second time I saw him he asked me if I wished to take Buddhist Precepts, that is to say, formally to become a Buddhist. I said, "Yes, of course." And so I received the Precepts from Xu Yun. He gave me the name Kuan Xiu, which means "big and wide practice".

No more soccer, basketball, or even ping pong. Now, during my summer vacation, I traveled the twenty miles or so out to Nan Hua Monastery twice each week. I'd take the train to Ma Ba Mountain, a landmark rock formation, and then I'd walk four miles to the monastery. Xu Yun gave me books about Buddhism to study; and that is how I spent my vacation time. For the first time in my life, I felt religion in my heart. I wanted to become a priest.

But my sudden religious conversion caused confusion at home. Things there were not so simple. In the first place, when I was born my parents went to a famous astrologer to have my natal horoscope cast. This astrologer clearly saw in the stars that I would become a high ranking military officer and that I would die by the time I was thirty. Having a dead hero in the family was an honor that they'd just as soon pass up. They therefore were happy that I did so well in school. That meant that the family businesses would be safe in my hands, especially since it was becoming more and more apparent that the businesses wouldn't do too well in my brother's hands. When my parents finally learned of my desire to become a priest, as Buddhists, they received the news happily; but as businessmen, they were very apprehensive. The wrong son had desired to become a priest!

But before I actually felt called to the priesthood, I had had other intentions about my future. I had never put any credence in the astrologer's predictions, so, being a little bored with the prospect of becoming a school teacher, I decided that after I finished Education College I'd go ahead and enter Chiang Kai Shek's Military School (Whampao Academy) in Canton. Chiang was Commandant of Whampao in those days.

Because of this ambition of mine, my brother was forced to prepare himself as best he could to take over the family businesses. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he never had to prove himself in the commercial world. After the Japanese invasion came the Communist revolution and there were no businesses left to take over.

But in 1934, when I was seventeen, and in my first year of Education College, the War with Japan had not yet begun. Xu Yun, with the foresight of the truly wise, immediately discouraged my military ambitions. Actually, I had abandoned that idea the day I met him. I wanted to become a priest but I didn't communicate this desire to anyone because I thought that it would sound vain

and frivolous. To me it would have seemed less conceited to say that I wanted to become a general than to say that I wanted to become a priest. But later on, in one of my many private talks with Xu Yun, I did confess to him my hope to one day become a priest. He simply said that he wanted me to stay in College and complete my education. Afterwards we'd talk about the priesthood.

In 1937, I was graduated from Education College. That autumn, at the Mid-Autumn Festival in mid-September, or the Eighth Month Full Moon by the Chinese calendar, I had my head shaved. Immediately I moved into Nan Hua monastery as a resident novice and awaited the Ordination Ceremony which would take place in three months' time. And sure enough, I and two hundred other monks were ordained at the mid-December, 1937, Ordination Ceremony.

It was on this occasion that Master Xu Yun gave me the name Jy Din which means "to understand and achieve peace". He also gave me many of his old garments which I felt very privileged to wear.

Shortly after I became a monk, the Japanese invaded China and I began to suspect that Xu Yun had had a premonition - that he had deliberately discouraged me from attending Military School because he feared that if I became an Army officer I might also become an Army casualty. He had other work for me to accomplish. And Xu Yun was a man for whom the word "failure" did not exist. He had goals; and to him, I was one of the instruments he would use to achieve his goals.

Life at Nan Hua monastery was hard. The monks and nuns raised their own vegetables, did their own cooking and cleaning, and even sewed their own clothes. They slept on wooden planks that were covered only by a thin grass mat. Money was obtained from charitable donations and from rents received from tenant farmers who leased monastery land.

When Xu Yun arrived at Nan Hua in 1934, he knew that there could be no happiness there until discipline was restored. He therefore established strict rules and regulations. The first time someone broke a rule, he or she was punished. The second time that person broke a rule, he or she was dismissed.

Xu Yun departmentalized all of the various jobs and duties and established a hierarchy, an ascending order of responsibility, to oversee each department. Everybody had to do his job, and Xu Yun tolerated no laxity. He had a strong stick which he carried with him wherever he went, and he was not afraid to use it. Amazingly, all of the arguments and misbehavior ceased. Law and order brought peace.

It was not enough, however, to restore monastic discipline. Xu Yun knew that the monastery buildings also had to be restored. Although my father did not supply any of the building materials - another company received the contract - he

did donate money to support the rebuilding project. Fortunately, the dormitory buildings were the first to be restored and everyone who lived at Nan Hua was able to appreciate the improvement in accommodations.

In 1938, Master Xu Yun was invited to come to Hong Kong, where Cantonese is spoken, for a long series of instructional talks and services. Since Master spoke Hunan, a northern dialect, and I spoke both Hunan and Cantonese, it was necessary that I accompany him in order to act as interpreter.

While we were there, the Japanese attacked Shanghai, to the north, and Nanjing, to the south. The casualties in Shanghai were staggering and, as far as Nanjing was concerned, the attacks there were so terrible that to this day the attack is known as the infamous Rape of Nanjing because of the deliberate slaughter of so many innocent civilians.

Because there were so few roads out of Nanjing and these were all dangerous, many refugees tried to escape the Japanese invaders by taking river routes. Naturally, because the city of Shao Guan is located at the confluence of two rivers, many boatloads of refugees arrived there.

When Xu Yun learned of the attacks on Shanghai and Nanjing, he anticipated this refugee crisis and immediately concluded the talks in Hong Kong. He and I returned to Nan Hua and began a program of refugee assistance.

Xu Yun decreed that the monks of Nan Hua adopt the ancient Buddhist custom, still followed by Theravadin Orders, of eating only two meals a day, breakfast and lunch. No food of any kind could be taken after the noon hour. The food that would have been eaten was donated to the refugees and, when necessary, to Chinese soldiers. Because of the people's great distress, Xu Yun held many additional religious services for the dead and injured. These services helped to bring hope and consolation to many anguished souls.

But to Xu Yun, a goal was a goal, and not even the Japanese invasion would deter him from restoring Nan Hua Monastery. The rebuilding program, therefore, continued.

In 1939 the famous Directional King statues were created and the Temple for their housing was built. The official installation ceremony was held in 1940. The rebuilding effort had a salutary effect on everyone's morale. It provided a sense of purpose and futurity.

Now I will tell you about the bombing of Nan Hua monastery to which I earlier referred:

After the Japanese attacked Nanjing and Shanghai, governors from fourteen Chinese provinces (states) held a series of meetings at Nan Hua

Monastery in an attempt to develop a coordinated defensive policy and strategy for resisting the Japanese invaders. These meetings were supposed to be top secret; but the Japanese, who had established an air base at Guang Zhou (Canton City), quickly learned about them.

Of course, though later everyone tried to blame the security leak on spies within one or another governor's staff, the fact is that, in the way that politicians usually are, nobody took much trouble to conceal the meetings. The governors and their entourages arrived splendidly... in limousines. There was enough dazzling chromium in Nan Hua's parking lot to attract the attention of someone on Mars. The Japanese in Guang Zhou, certainly, had no trouble in targeting this secret political meeting place.

Therefore, in an effort to destroy so many important civilian leaders in one strike, the Japanese sent three fighter-bombers north to attack Nan Hua monastery.

When the planes began to bomb and strafe the monastery complex, Xu Yun immediately ordered everyone to take cover and to remain calm. He sent the governors into the Sixth Patriarch's Temple and the monks into the larger Ming Temple. He, himself, calmly went into the most obvious target, the Meditation Hall, to pray for everyone's safety.

In the first run, one of the two men who were assigned to guard the governors' cars, was killed. He had left his post and had taken cover in a large sewer pipe that was destined to be used in the rebuilding project, and one of the bombs fell on the sewer pipe, killing him. Ironically, the other guard remained at his post in the very visible guardhouse, and he escaped injury.

Another bomb whistled down to earth and struck just outside the monastery walls, destroying a large Joshu cedar tree and creating a hole in the ground that is still there today, filled with water, like a small pond.

But then, after Xu Yun entered the Meditation Hall and began to pray, a miracle occurred. Two of the three bombers crashed into each other and fell to earth at Ma Ba Mountain. The remaining airplane immediately returned to its base in Guang Zhou.

Naturally, the midair crash was credited to Xu Yun's spiritual power. All the Chinese who knew him had no doubt about this; but what is more important, the Japanese evidently began to believe it, too. Governors or no governors, they never again attempted to bomb Nan Hua.

The Japanese pressed the war into the interior and at the end of 1944 they finally succeeded in taking the city of Shao Guan. But even then, despite being so close to Nan Hua, they did not attack it. We believed that they feared the

spiritual power of Xu Yun. Throughout the occupation, they never permitted their occupation soldiers to disturb the sanctity of the monastery.

But to return to my story - in 1940, Wei Yin, the man who would one day succeed Xu Yun as Abbot of Nan Hua Monastery, became a monk. It was my honor to shave his head and to give him his name Wei Yin which means, the Dharma Seal of Cause and Effect. His secondary name was Zhi Gua which means know the results. In other words, determine an action's cause and its effect and you will obtain the desired results. Wei Yin stayed at Nan Hua monastery to assist Xu Yun with the additional burdens of helping the war victims. Also that year, knowing of the disrepair and disorder into which the once great Yun Men Monastery had fallen, Xu Yun sent me there to help restore order and to oversee the building restoration. For this task Xu Yun elevated me to the rank of Master.

It was necessary that I pass many Japanese soldiers during my two-day walk to Yun Men monastery. But again, Xu Yun's influence was so great that it extended even to me and no soldier dared to interfere with my passage. Having safely arrived, I took up residence at Yun Men.

At Dan Xia Shan, the third great monastery in the Shao Guan area, there were no problems with the Japanese. This monastery's remote location discouraged military activity and Master Ben Wen was able to maintain monastic peace and discipline.

I remained at Yun Men monastery until 1944 when Xu Yun decided to establish a Buddhist College at Nan Hua in order to teach the ancient Vinaya Monastic Code to all those who would become monks and nuns. Now I could understand Xu Yun's goal and his advice to me to stay in college. My teaching degree qualified me to supervise the organization of this new Vinaya School and also to become one of the teachers.

Because Xu Yun believed in the necessity of providing children with a good education, he also decided to establish a primary school at Nan Hua. He wanted this school to be a first rate institution and, in short order, students from many parts of China came to Nan Hua to be educated. Naturally, rich parents donated money for their children's tuition, books, and school supplies and also for their room and board. But Xu Yun believed that all children, rich or poor, deserved to be educated and so poor children were permitted to attend this fine school without cost of any kind. Xu Yun provided them with books and school supplies and whatever food and lodging they required. I regarded my responsibilities at the school as sacred and did my best to perform my duties with great devotion and care. Everyone associated with the school felt the same way as I, and because of all our untiring efforts the school quickly gained its reputation for excellence.

While Master Wei Yin and I resided at Nan Hua, Xu Yun went to live at Yun Men Temple in order to continue the supervision of the Temple reconstruction.

Then the direction of my Dharma Path took another turn.

Many Chinese people had moved to Hawaii, especially during the war years. But though there were many Chinese Buddhists living in Hawaii, which was then only an American Territory, there was no Buddhist Temple or even any priests to teach and to conduct services. These Chinese-Hawaiians repeatedly sent delegations to Hong Kong asking that priests be sent to Hawaii to serve the people and also to supervise the construction of a temple. Naturally, they wanted Xu Yun to come to Honolulu to create the new temple, but Xu Yun had dedicated himself to the restoration of Yun Men Monastery and so he decided to send me in his place.

In 1949, I completed the first stage of this mission when I arrived in Hong Kong and initiated the necessary immigration procedures. I would not arrive in Honolulu until 1956. Hawaii became a state in 1959; but our temple, which I named Hsu Yun (Xu Yun) Temple, was the first Buddhist Temple in Hawaii.

Not long after I arrived in Hong Kong in 1949, the Chinese Civil War ended, and the Communists took control of the government. Cadres of Communist thugs, supposing that Churches and Temples were repositories of hidden gold and other valuables, marched on the defenseless religious buildings and demanded that the clergymen turn over these nonexistent treasures to them.

In 1951, while I was in Hong Kong, a cadre of these thugs came to Yun Men Monastery and demanded that Xu Yun give them the temple's gold and valuables. Xu Yun tried to explain that there were no such valuables at Yun Men Monastery. But they refused to believe him and one by one, they beat the monks in an effort to force a disclosure of the treasure's location. One monk was actually beaten to death; several monks disappeared and their bodies were never found. Many suffered serious injuries such as broken arms and ribs. During the three months the thugs occupied the monastery, they would regularly interrogate and beat Xu Yun and then throw him into a small dark room for days, depriving him of food and water. Several times he was beaten into senselessness and left for dead. But despite the numerous internal injuries and broken bones this old man of ninety three had sustained, he exercised his enormous willpower and refused to relinquish his life until he had completed his mission. He knew that his living presence, if only to a small degree, was serving to restrain the attackers. He also knew that for so long as he remained alive, he could inspire his followers; and in those difficult times they needed all the inspiration they could get.

Determining that his will to survive must be greater than his attackers' will to destroy him, Xu Yun, though physically frail, was yet indomitable; and he recovered despite the tortures to which they had subjected him.

Though the thugs had tried to keep secret their treatment of this holy man, news of his torture soon reached the outside world, and Chinese people from around the globe complained bitterly to the Beijing government. It was unthinkable that Japanese invaders would respect the priesthood and the monasteries but that the Chinese militia would violate them.

The Beijing authorities sent a delegation immediately to Yun Men but because Xu Yun feared reprisals he refused to file any formal complaints. As soon as he had regained his strength, however, he made the difficult journey to Beijing and personally petitioned the government to restrain these cadres. He insisted that they order that all religious institutions be respected, that the clergy be left unmolested, and that the Chinese people be permitted to practice freedom of religion. The authorities, fearing perhaps the power of his now legendary reputation, relented; and for a time, at least during the remaining years of Xu Yun's life, the government's policy became more tolerant towards religion.

The government would not, however, tolerate further criticism of any kind from outside sources, and so all lines of communication were severed. In Hong Kong I desperately tried to get news about Xu Yun's fate, but it was impossible to learn anything. I wrote numerous letters, but none was answered.

However, as is customary, I continued to send Xu Yun copies of all of the essays and articles on Buddhism that I had written. In happier days, according to custom, I would have received comments from him. But in those unhappy days, none of my submissions to him were acknowledged.

Then in 1952, I wrote a dissertation on the Heart Sutra that was particularly well-received. The government in Beijing decided to permit its publication. I immediately wrote to the publisher in Beijing expressing my great desire to learn of my master's response to the dissertation. Miraculously, one of the clerks in the publisher's office decided to hand-carry my letter and dissertation directly to Xu Yun and to await his reply. Xu Yun read both, then he told the clerk that he approved of the dissertation and sent me his blessing. His words were relayed to me; and this indirect communication was the last I ever had with my beloved master.

On October 13, 1959, at the age of 101, Master Xu Yun entered final Nirvana. The news of his death saddened me beyond description. Publicly, I held special memorial services and wrote an epitaph for him; but privately, I was overwhelmed with sorrow. For days I wept and could not eat or sleep. I knew how very much I owed him. I knew that in his wisdom he foresaw the threat to our Chinese Buddhist Dharma, the Dharma of Hui Neng and Lin Ji and Han

Shan. He wanted this Dharma transplanted to the United States where it would be safe, and he had given me the honor of doing this.

The manner of Xu Yun's death also caused me to appreciate even more the power of his great heart. I understood clearly that he was able to transcend physical existence and to postpone his entrance into final Nirvana until he was ready to make this last journey... until he had fulfilled his sacred obligation to use his influence to protect all clergymen in China.

I and other Buddhist clergy, along with many clergymen of other religious faiths, owe our lives to Xu Yun's devotion to the Buddha Amitabha and to his unshakable conviction that this Glorious Presence dwells within the hearts of all human beings.

Shanti. Shanti. Shanti. Amitofo!
(Amitabha)

January 1996
Master Jy Din Sakya
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Honolulu, HI



Ven. Master Jy Din Shakya

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Dear Friends, let me tell you a little story a wise man once told me. He said:

"Once I found myself in an unfamiliar country, walking down a strange street. I looked around trying to get my bearings; and seeing two men who were standing nearby, I approached them. `Where am I?' I asked. `Who are you people?'

"The first man replied, `This is the world of Samsara, and in this world I happen to be the very tallest dwarf there is!' And the other man replied, `Yes, and I happen to be the shortest giant!'

"This encounter left me very confused because, you see, both men were exactly the same height."



Master Xu (Hsu) Yun

I preface my remarks to you with this little story because I want to emphasize at the outset how important it is to consider the perception of things.

Hui Neng, the Sixth and last Patriarch of our Chan Path, once came upon two monks who were arguing about a banner that was waving in the wind.

The first monk said, "It is the banner that is moving." The other monk said, "No! It is the wind that is moving."

The Sixth Patriarch admonished them both. "Good Sirs," he said. "It is your mind that is doing all the moving!"

In the world of Samsara, Man is the measure of all things. Everything is relative. Everything is changing. Only in the real world, the world of Nirvana, is there constancy.

In Chan our task is to discriminate - not between the false and the false, but between the false and the real. Differences in outward appearance do not matter at all. The real world is inside us. It is even inside our mind.

Now it is my happy task to help you to gain entrance into the real world, the world in which there are no dwarfs and giants and meaningless arguments. In the real world there is only peace, and joy, and truth, and freedom from the nagging desire for troublesome illusions.

Dear friends, every human being possesses two self-natures: an apparent one and a real one. The apparent one is our small self or ego which is everywhere different from all other small selves; the real one is our Great Buddha Self which is everywhere the same. Our small self exists in the apparent world, the world of Samsara. Our Buddha Self exists in the real world, the world of Nirvana.

Both worlds are located in the same place. In the Heart Sutra we read, "Form is not different from emptiness and emptiness is not different from form." Everyone wants to know, "How can Samsara and Nirvana be the same? How can illusion be the same as reality? How can I be me and the Buddha, too?" These are good questions. Every Buddhist needs to know the answer to them.

The answer lies in the way we perceive reality. If we perceive reality directly, we see it in its Nirvanic purity. If we perceive it indirectly - through our ego consciousness - we see it in its Samsaric distortion. Why is our view of reality flawed?



Samsara is the world our small self thinks it sees and apprehends with its senses. Sometimes we just make mistakes. If a man were walking in the woods and came upon a coil of rope on the path and he thought the rope was a snake, he'd quickly run away. To him that rope was a snake and he'd react accordingly. When he returned home he'd likely tell everyone about that dangerous snake that almost bit him in the woods. His fear was genuine. His reason for being afraid was not.

The small ego self also misperceives reality whenever it imposes arbitrary esthetic or moral judgments upon it. If one woman sees another woman who is wearing a green hat and says, "I see a woman who is wearing a green hat," there is no problem. But if she says, "I see a woman who is wearing an ugly green hat," she is making a Samsaric judgment. Somebody else might find that hat beautiful. But in reality, it is neither beautiful nor ugly. It merely is.

Likewise, when a fox kills a rabbit, this, to the bunnies who will starve to death because their mother has been killed, is a very evil act. But to the hungry fox cubs who eat the rabbit that their mother has brought them, this same event is decidedly good. In reality, the event is neither good nor evil. It merely is.

Reality is also misinterpreted because both the observer and that which is being observed are constantly changing.

There is no precise moment in which a bud becomes a bloom, or a bloom becomes a fruit, or a fruit becomes a seed, or a seed, a budding tree. All these changes are subtle and continuous.

We cannot step into the same river twice for the water is constantly flowing. We, also, are not the same person from one minute to the next. Constantly we acquire new information and new experiences as we simultaneously forget old information and old experiences. Yesterday we can recall what we had for dinner the evening before. Tomorrow, we will no longer be privileged to recall that menu, unless perhaps, it was a sumptuous feast of some kind... or else we always eat the same food and can say with certainty, "It was rice and bean curd."

The illusion of life is the opposite of the illusion of the cinema. In the cinema a series of individual images are run together to form the illusion of continuous movement. In life, we intercept continuous motion, isolate and freeze an image, and then name and fix it as though it were a concrete, individual object or event. We don't always agree on fixing the moment in time. What is a young woman? If a man is ninety years old, lots of women are young women.

Well, we may have a better idea of why our small self misperceives reality, but still we wonder, why do we have two selves in the first place?

The answer is simply because we are human beings.

Our small self provides us with that conscious sense of continuing identity that allows each of us to know, "I am today who I was yesterday and will be again tomorrow." Without it, we could not organize the sensory data that assail us. Without it, we would have no sense of belonging or of being connected to others. We would have no parents or family to call our own, no spouse or

children, no teachers or friends to guide and encourage us. Our small self gives us our human nature.

As we grow we discover that our lifeline's thread is not a long continuous strand with each event separately strung on it like beads on a rosary. No, the thread weaves itself into a net, an interdependent array of knots. We cannot remove a single knot without affecting the others. We cannot pull out a single line of our history without, perhaps, altering the entire course of it. This network of information and experience, of conditioning and association, of memory and misunderstanding soon becomes a complicated and bewildering tangle; and we become confused about our place in the scheme of things. When we are young, we see ourselves at the center of our universe, but as we get older, we are no longer certain of our position or our identity. We think, "I am not the person I was when I was ten years old, but neither am I anybody different." We soon wonder, "Who am I?" Our ego self has led us into this confusion.

Confusion leads to calamity, and then life, as the Buddha noted in his First Noble Truth, becomes bitter and painful.

How do we clear up this confusion? We turn our consciousness around. We reject the outward world's complexity in favor of the inward world's simplicity. Instead of trying to gain power and glory for our small ego self, we turn our consciousness inward to discover the glory of our Buddha Self. Instead of making ourselves wretched seeking to be a master of others, we find joy and contentment in being One with our Buddha Self and in serving others.

Dear friends, the purpose of Chan training is to clarify our vision so that we can gain insight into our true identities. Chan enables us to transcend our human nature and realize our Buddha Nature.

Centuries ago, our Chan Meditation sect was founded and formed by two great men: the First Patriarch, Bodhidharma, who came to China from the West, and Hui Neng, the Chinese-born Sixth Patriarch.

Because of these two men, Chan flourished, spreading throughout China and into many distant lands. Now, what were the most important teachings of Bodhidharma and Hui Neng? "Rid the mind of egotism! Free it of defiling thoughts!"

If these directives are not followed, there can be no success in Chan practice. The Chan Path lies before you! Follow it! It will deliver you to peace, joy, truth and freedom.

CHAPTER 2: CHAN TRAINING



Many people begin Chan training by thinking, "Well, since all is Maya or Samsaric illusion, it doesn't matter what I do or how I do it. The only thing that's important is gaining Nirvana. So, since there's no such thing as good or evil, I'll do what I want." It does matter what we do. Chan is a branch of the Buddhist religion and as Buddhists we must adhere to ethical precepts. Samsara or no Samsara, we obey the Precepts. And in addition to this, we also follow the strict rules of discipline that govern our training. Let's start with the training rules:

While there are many different methods that may be followed, before beginning any of them, a practitioner must meet four basic requirements:

He or she must:

1. Understand the Law of Causality.
2. Accept the rules of discipline.
3. Maintain an unshakable faith in the existence of the Buddha Self.
4. Be determined to succeed in whichever method he chooses.

I will explain each of these four prerequisites:

First, the Law of Causality simply states that evil produces evil and good produces good. A poison tree yields poison fruit while a healthy tree yields good.

Conceptually, this appears to be simple; but in actuality it is rather complex.

Evil deeds are a vile investment. They guarantee a return in pain, bitterness, anxiety and remorse. There is no profit to be had from actions that spring from greed, lust, anger, pride, laziness, or jealousy. All such motivations merely serve the ego's ambitions. Evil deeds can never promote spiritual fulfillment. They only guarantee spiritual penury.

On the other hand, good deeds, provided they are not done conditionally - as an investment that will yield some future reward, will bring to the doer of them peace and spiritual fulfillment.

An egoless good deed is very different from a contrived good deed. On the surface, the effect may seem the same; help or kindness that is needed is given. But the person who helps another with the hidden expectation of receiving some future benefit, usually does evil, not good. Let me illustrate this point:

In China there was once a Prince who loved birds. Whenever he found an injured bird, he would feed and nurse it back to health; and then, when the bird had regained its strength, he would set it free with much rejoicing.

Naturally, he grew quite famous for his talent as a loving healer of wounded birds. Whenever an injured bird was found anywhere in his kingdom, the bird would quickly be brought to him, and he would express his gratitude to the thoughtful person who brought it.

But then, in order to curry the Prince's favor, people soon began to catch birds and to deliberately injure them so that they could take them to the palace.

So many birds were killed in the course of capture and maiming that his kingdom became a hell for birds.

When the Prince saw how much harm his goodness was causing, he decreed that no wounded bird should ever be helped.

When people saw that there was no profit to be gained from helping birds, they ceased harming them.

Sometimes it happens that our experiences are like this Prince's. Sometimes, when we think we're doing the most good, we learn to our chagrin that we're actually causing the most harm.

Perform a good deed in silence and anonymity! Forget about rejoicing. A good deed should have a very short life, and once dead, should be quickly buried. Let it rest in peace. Don't keep trying to resuscitate it. Too often, we try to turn a good deed into a ghost that haunts people, that keeps reminding them of our wonderful service - just in case they start to forget.

But what happens when we are the recipient of someone else's kindness? Well, then, we ought to let that good deed gain immortality. Letting someone else's good deeds live is much more difficult than letting our own good deeds die. Let me illustrate this, too.

There once was a grocer, a kind and decent man who valued all his customers. He cared for them and wanted them all to be healthy and well-fed. He kept his prices so low that he did not earn much money, not even enough to hire someone to help him in his little shop. He worked very hard in his honest poverty, but he was happy.

One day a customer came and told him a sad story. Her husband had been injured and would not be able to work for several months. She had no money to buy food for him and for their children. "Without food," she wept, "we will all die."

The grocer sympathized with her and agreed to extend credit to her. "Each week I'll provide you with rice for seven days and vegetables for four days," he said, "and that surely will be enough to sustain your family's health; and then, when your husband returns to work, you can keep to the same menu while paying off your account. Before you know it, you'll all be eating vegetables seven days a week."

The woman was so grateful. Every week she received rice for seven days and vegetables for four.

But when her husband returned to work she had to decide whether to pay off her old debt while continuing to eat vegetables only four days a week or to patronize a new grocer and eat vegetables seven days a week. She chose the latter and justified her failure to pay her debt by telling people that her former grocer had sold her rotten vegetables.

How often, when we want something badly, do we promise that if we are given what we desire, we will dedicate our lives to demonstrate our gratitude? But then, once we receive what we so ardently sought, our pledge weakens and dies, almost automatically. We quickly bury it, without ceremony. This is not the Chan way.

And so, just as a farmer who sows soy beans does not expect to harvest melons, we must not expect, whenever we commit selfish or immoral or injurious acts, to harvest spiritual purity. Neither can we hope to hide from our misdeeds by removing ourselves from the location in which we committed them, or to assume that time will expunge the record of them. Never may we suppose that if we just ignore our misdeeds long enough people whom we have injured will conveniently die, taking to the grave with them our need to atone for the damage we have caused. It is our good deeds that we must bury... not our victims or broken promises.

We may not think that because there is no witness around to question us, we will not have to answer for our misdeeds. Many old Buddhist stories illustrate this principle. Let me tell you a few of my favorites:

During the generation that preceded Shakyamuni Buddha's life on earth, many of his Shakya clansmen were brutally massacred by the wicked king, Virudhaka, the so-called "Crystal King".

Why did this terrible event occur?

Well, it so happened that near Kapila, the Shakya city in which the Buddha was born, there was a large pond and, on the shore of that pond, there was a small village. Nobody remembers the name of the village.

One year a great drought occurred. The crops withered and the villagers couldn't think of anything else to do but kill and eat the fish that lived in the pond. They caught every fish except one. This last fish was captured by a boy who played with the wretched creature by bouncing it on its head. That's what he was doing when the villagers took it from him and killed it.

Then the rains came again and everywhere in the kingdom life returned to normal. People got married and had children. One of those children was Siddhartha, the Buddha, who was born in the city of Kapila, near that village and pond.

Siddhartha grew up and preached the Dharma, gaining many followers. Among these followers was the King of Shravasti, King Prasenajit. This King married a Shakya girl and the two of them produced a son: Prince Virudhaka, the "Crystal One". The royal couple decided to raise the Prince in Kapila, the Buddha's city.

At first, everything was fine. Prince Virudhaka was a healthy baby and before long he grew into a nice strong boy. But before he was even ready to start school, a momentous event occurred.

It happened that one day, during the Buddha's absence from Kapila, the young prince climbed up onto the Buddha's Honored Chair and began to play there. He meant no harm - he was just a child playing. But Oh! - when the Buddha's clansmen saw the prince playing in this sacred place they became very angry and reprimanded the prince and dragged him down from the chair, humiliating and punishing him.

How can a child understand the foolishness of zealots? Adults can't figure it out. It's really quite mysterious. Their harsh treatment served only to embitter the prince and to cause him to hate all his Shakya clansmen. It was their harsh treatment that started him on his career of cruelty and vengeance.

Eventually, the prince, by killing his own father, it is said, was able to ascend the throne of Shravasti. Now, as King Virudhaka, the Crystal King, he was finally able to take revenge against the Shakya clan. Leading his own soldiers, he began to attack the city of Kapila.

When the Buddha's clansmen came to tell him about the impending massacre, they found him suffering from a terrible headache. They begged him to intervene and rescue the people of Kapila from the Crystal King's brutal attack, but the Buddha, groaning in pain, refused to help. "A fixed Karma cannot be changed," he said.

The clansmen then turned to Maudgalyayana, one of the Buddha's most powerful disciples, and begged for his assistance. He listened to their sad complaint, and moved to pity, decided to assist the besieged citizens of Kapila.

Using his supernatural abilities, Maudgalyayana extended his miraculous bowl to the threatened Shakya and allowed five hundred of them to climb into it. Then he raised the bowl high in the air, thinking that he had lifted them to safety. But when he again lowered the bowl, the five hundred men had turned into a pool of blood.

The dreadful sight so alarmed everyone that the Buddha decided to disclose the story of his ancestors, those villagers who had killed all the fish during the drought.

"This marauding army of soldiers that are now attacking Kapila had been those fish," he explained. "The people of Kapila who are now being massacred were the people who killed those fish. The Crystal King, himself, was that last big fish. And who, do you think," the Buddha asked, holding a cold cloth against his forehead, "was the boy who bounced that fish on its head?"

So, for killing the fish, the people suffered death. And for hurting that fish's head, the Buddha was now plagued with an awful headache.

And what about Virudhaka, the Crystal King? Naturally, he was reborn in Hell.

And so, you see, there is no end to cause and effect. A cause produces an effect which itself becomes the cause of another effect. Action and reaction. Tribute and Retribution. This is the Law of Causality. Sooner or later our evil deeds catch up with us. The only way to prevent the effect is to prevent the cause. We must learn to be forgiving, to overlook injury and insult, and to never seek revenge or even harbor any grudges. We must never become zealots, self-righteous and proud in our vain notions of piety and duty, and above all, we must always be gentle, especially with children.

Let me tell you another cause and effect story. This one concerns Chan Master Bai Zhang who actually was able to liberate a wild fox-spirit. Very few people have been able to do that!

It seems that one evening, after a Chan meeting had ended and all his disciples had retired, Master Bai Zhang noticed that an elderly man was lingering outside the Meditation Hall.

Bai Zhang approached the man and asked, "Tell me, sir, who or what is it that you're seeking?"

The elderly man replied, "No, not `sir'. I am not a human being at all. I am a wild fox who is merely inhabiting the body of a man."

Bai Zhang was naturally very surprised and curious. "How did you get into this condition?" he asked.

The elderly fox-man explained, "Five hundred years ago, I was the head monk of this monastery. One day, a junior monk came and asked me, `When a man attains enlightenment is he still subject to the Law of Causality?' and I boldly answered him, `No, he is exempt from the Law.' My punishment for this false and arrogant answer was that my spirit was changed into the spirit of a wild fox and so I ran off, into the mountains. As a fox-man I could not die, and, for so long as my ignorance remains, I must continue to live in this wretched condition. For five hundred years I have been roaming the forests seeking the knowledge that will free me. Master, I beg you to be compassionate towards me and to enlighten me to the truth."

Master Bei Zhang spoke gently to the fox-man. "Ask me the same question that the junior monk asked you, and I will give you the correct answer."

The fox-man complied. "I wish to ask the master this: When a man attains enlightenment is he still subject to the Law of Causality?"

Bai Zhang answered, "Yes. He is never exempt from the Law. He may never close his eyes to the possibilities of cause and effect. He must remain aware of all his present and past actions."

Suddenly the old fox-man was enlightened and free. He prostrated himself before the master and thanked him profusely. "At last," he said, "I am liberated!" Then, as he started to leave, he turned and asked Bai Zhang, "Master, since I am a monk, would you kindly grant me the usual funeral rites for a monk? I live nearby, in a den on the mountain behind the monastery, and I will go there now to die."

Bai Zhang agreed, and the next day he went to the mountain and located the den. But instead of finding an old monk there, Bai Zhang saw only a disturbance in the den's earthen floor. He probed this disturbance with his stick and discovered a dead fox!

Well, a promise is a promise! Master Bai Zhang conducted the usual monk's funeral rites over the fox's body. Everyone thought Bai Zhang quite mad, especially when he led a solemn funeral procession... with a dead fox on the bier!

So you see, dear friends, even the attainment of Buddhahood does not exempt one from the Law of Causality. When even the Buddha can suffer a headache for having been unkind to a fish, how much more is our need to remain heedful of the principle that an injurious act, sooner or later, will bring us an injurious retribution. Be careful in what you say or do! Don't risk becoming a fox spirit!

As to the second requirement, the strict observance of the rules of discipline, I will tell you sincerely that there can be no spiritual progress without morality and the fulfillment of religious duty.

Discipline is the foundation upon which enlightenment rests. Discipline regulates our behavior and makes it unchanging. Steadiness becomes steadfastness and it is this which produces wisdom.

The Surangama Sutra clearly teaches us that mere accomplishment in meditation will not erase our impurities. Even if we were able to demonstrate great proficiency in meditation, still, without adherence to discipline, we would easily fall into Mara's evil realm of demons and heretics.

A man or woman who is diligent in observing moral discipline and religious duty is protected and encouraged by sky dragons and angels, just as he is avoided and feared by demons from the underworld and heretics from everywhere.

It once happened that in the state of Kashmir, a poisonous earth dragon lived in a cave near a monastery of five hundred Theravadin arhats. This dragon terrorized the region and made people's lives miserable. Everyday the arhats would assemble, and together they would try to use the power of their collective meditation to drive away the dragon. But always they failed. The dragon simply would not leave.

Then one day a Mahayana Chan monk happened to stop at the monastery. The arhats complained about this terrible dragon and asked the monk to join them in meditation, to add the power of his meditation to theirs. "We must force this beast to leave!" they wailed. The Chan monk merely smiled at them and went directly to the poisonous dragon's cave.

Standing in the cave's entrance, the monk called to the dragon, "Wise and virtuous Sir, would you be kind enough to depart from your lair and find refuge in a more distant place?"

"Well," said the dragon, "since you have so politely asked, I will accede to your request and depart forthwith." The dragon, you see, had a fine sense of etiquette. So, away he went!

From their monastery, the arhats watched all this in absolute astonishment. Surely this monk possessed miraculous samadhi powers!

As soon as the monk returned, the arhats gathered around him and begged him to tell them about these wonderful powers.

"I did not use any special meditation or samadhi," said the monk. "I simply kept the rules of discipline and these rules stipulate that I must observe the minor requirements of courtesy as carefully as I observe the major requirements of morality."

So we can see that the collective power of five-hundred arhats' meditation-samadhi are sometimes not the equal of one monk's simple adherence to the rules of discipline.

And if you ask, "Why should strict attention to discipline be necessary if the mind has attained a non- judgmental state? Why should an honest and straightforward man even need to continue to practice Chan?" I would ask such a man, "Is your mind so secure that if the lovely Goddess of the Moon were to come down to you and embrace you with her naked body, would your heart remain undisturbed?" And you... If someone without having cause were to insult or to strike you, would you feel no anger and resentment? Can you be certain that you would always resist comparing yourself to others, or that you would always refrain from being judgmental? Can you be sure that you would always know right from wrong? Now, if you are absolutely certain that you would never

yield to temptation, that you would never err at all, then, open your mouth and speak loud and clear! Otherwise, do not even whisper a lie.

As regards the third requirement of having a firm belief in one's Buddha Self, please know that faith is the mother, the nourishing source of our determination to submit to training and to perform our religious duties.

If we seek liberation from the travails of this world, we must have a firm faith in the Buddha's assurance that each living being on earth possesses Tathagata wisdom and, therefore, has the potential of attaining Buddhahood. What prevents us from realizing this wisdom and attaining this Buddhahood? The answer is that we simply do not have faith in his assurances. We prefer to remain in ignorance of this truth, to accept the false as genuine, and to dedicate our lives to satisfying all our foolish cravings.

Ignorance of the truth is a disease. Now, as the Buddha taught, the Dharma is like a hospital that has many doors. We can open any one of them and enter into a place of cure. But we must have faith in our physicians and in the efficacy of the treatment.

Whenever he wanted to illustrate the problems which doubt and lack of faith cause, the Buddha would relate the parable of the physician. He would ask, "Suppose you were wounded by a poisoned arrow and a friend brought a physician to help you. Would you say to your friend, `No! No! No! I'm not going to let this fellow touch me until I find out who shot me! I want to know the culprit's name, address, and so forth. That's important, isn't it? And I want to know more about this arrow. Is the tip stone or iron, bone or horn? And what about the wooden shaft? Is it oak or elm or pine? What kind of sinew has been used to secure the tip to the shaft? Is it the sinew of an ox, a monkey, or a ruru deer? And what kind of feathers are in the shaft? Are they from a heron or a hawk? And what about the poison that's been used? I want to know what kind it is. And who is this fellow, anyway? Are you sure he's a qualified doctor? After all, I don't want a quack to treat me. I think I have a right to know these things, don't you? So, please answer my questions or I'll not let the man touch me.' Well," said the Buddha, "before you could get your questions answered to your satisfaction, you would be dead."

So, dear friends, when you find yourself suffering from the ills of the world, trust in The Great Physician. He has cured millions of others. Which believer has ever perished in his care? Which believer has failed to be restored to eternal life and happiness by following his regimen? None. All have benefited. And so will you if you have faith in his methods.

Faith is a kind of skill that you can develop. If, for example, you wish to make bean curd, you begin by boiling and grinding the soybeans and then you add a solution of gypsum powder or lemon juice to the boiled beans. You know

that you can stand there, if you wish, and watch the curds form. You have faith in your method because it always works. Thus you gain the feeling of certainty. Of course, the first time that you made bean curd, assuming that you were completely unfamiliar with its production, you may have lacked faith in the method. You might have been filled with doubt that gypsum or lemon water would cause the boiled beans to form curds. But once you succeeded and saw with your own eyes that the recipe was correct and that the procedure worked, you accepted without reservation the prescribed method. Your faith in the method was established.

Therefore, we must all have faith that we each have a Buddha Nature and that we can encounter this Buddha Nature if we diligently follow a proper Dharma path.

If we are afraid, we should also remember Master Yong Jia's words recorded in his Song of Enlightenment;

"In the Tathagata's Real World neither egos, rules, nor hells exist. No samsaric evils may be found there. If I'm lying, you can pull my tongue out and stuff my mouth with sand, and leave it that way throughout eternity."

No one ever pulled Master Yong Jia's tongue out.

As regards the fourth prerequisite, being resolute in our determination to succeed in whichever method we have chosen, please let me warn you about the folly of jumping around from method to method. Think of the Dharma as a mountain you must climb. There are many paths which lead to the summit. Choose one and stay with it! It will lead you there! But you will never get to the top if you race around the mountain trying one path and then rejecting it in favor of another that looks easier. You will circle the mountain many times, but you will never climb it. Stay with your chosen method. Be absolutely faithful to it.

In Chan we always tell stories about purchased devils. One particular story is very appropriate here:

One day a fellow was strolling through the marketplace when he came to a stall that said, "For Sale: First Class Devils." Of course, the man was intrigued. Wouldn't you be? I would. "Let me see one of these devils," he said to the merchant.

The devil was a strange little creature... rather like a monkey. "He's really quite intelligent," said the merchant. "And all you have to do is tell him each morning what you want him to accomplish that day, and he will do it."

"Anything?" asked the man.

"Yes," said the merchant, "Anything. All your household chores will be finished by the time you get home from work."

Now the man happened to be a bachelor and so the devil sounded like a pretty good investment. "I'll take it," he said. And he paid the merchant.

"There's just one little thing," said the merchant - there's always just one little thing, isn't there? - "You must be faithful in telling him what to do each day. Never omit this! Give him his instructions every morning and all will be well. Remember to keep to this routine!"

The man agreed and took his devil home and every morning he told him to do the dishes and the laundry and to clean the house and prepare the dinner; and by the time he returned from work, everything was accomplished in the most wonderful manner.

But then the man's birthday came and his friends at work decided to give him a party. He got very drunk and stayed in town overnight at a friend's house and went directly to work the following morning. He never returned home to tell his devil what to do. And when he returned home that night he discovered that his devil had burned down his house and was dancing around the smoking ruins.

And isn't this what always happens? When we take up a practice we vow with our blood that we will hold to it faithfully. But then the first time we set it down and neglect it, we bring disaster to it. It's as though we never had a practice at all.

So, regardless of whether you choose the path of Mantra, or Yantra, or Breath Counting, or a Hua Tou, or repeating the Buddha's name, stay with your method! If it doesn't deliver you today, try again tomorrow. Tell yourself that you will be so determined that if you have to continue your practice in the next life, you will do so in order to succeed. Old Master Wei Shan used to say, "Stay with your chosen practice. Take as many reincarnations as you need to attain Buddhahood."

I know it's easy to become discouraged when we think we're not making progress. We try and try but when enlightenment doesn't come we want to give up the struggle. Perseverance is itself an accomplishment.

Be steadfast and patient. You're not alone in your struggle. According to ancient wisdom, "We train for dreary eons - for enlightenment that occurs in a flashing instant."

CHAPTER 3: GAINING ENLIGHTENMENT

Chan has two famous Masters named Han Shan: a 9th Century recluse whose name means Cold Mountain and a l6th Century teacher whose name means Silly Mountain. Cold Mountain is Chan Buddhism's greatest poet. Silly Mountain was a pretty good poet, too. He's probably Chan's second best poet.

Cold Mountain appealed to nature to lead him to peace and understanding. In finding beauty in the natural world he found beauty in himself. That's the way hermits operate. They look; they ponder; they convert loneliness into solitude.

Silly Mountain transcended himself by working for others. He strove to help ordinary folks gain enlightenment. That's a little harder than surviving frost and hunger.

Han Shan, Cold mountain, said: High on the mountain's peak Infinity in all directions! The solitary moon looks down From its midnight loft Admires its reflection in the icy pond. Shivering, I serenade the moon. No Chan in the verse. Plenty in the melody.

Han Shan, Silly Mountain, tried to put what couldn't be said into words everybody could understand: Put a fish on land and he will remember the ocean until he dies. Put a bird in a cage, yet he will not forget the sky. Each remains homesick for his true home, the place where his nature has decreed that he should be. Man is born in the state of innocence. His original nature is love and grace and purity. Yet he emigrates so casually, without even a thought of his old home. Is this not sadder than the fishes and the birds?

We would all like to reflect the Moon of Enlightenment. We would all like to get home to Innocence. How do we accomplish this? We follow the Dharma.

The Buddha saw the unenlightened life's ignorance as a diseased condition. His Four Noble Truths have a medical connotation: One, life in Samsara is bitter and painful. Two, craving is the cause of this bitterness and pain. Three, there is a cure for this malady. Four, the cure is to follow the Eightfold Path.

First, we need to recognize that we are ill. Second, we need a diagnosis. Third, we need to be assured that what's wrong with us will respond to treatment. Fourth, we require a therapeutic regimen.

Samsara is the world seen through the ego. It is a troubled and sick world because of the ego's unceasing cravings.

Trying to satisfy the demands of the ego is like trying to name the highest number. No matter how large a number we can think of, one more can always be added to it to make an even higher number. There is no way to attain the ultimate.

Dear friends, is it not true that no matter how much money a person has, he always thinks he needs a little more, that no matter how comfortable a person's home is, he always wants a place that's a little more palatial, that no matter how many admirers he has, he always needs to hear a little more applause?

Constant striving results in constant strife.

So what are we to do? First we must understand that the problems which the ego creates cannot be solved in Samsara's world of ever changing illusions. Why? Because the ego is itself an ever changing, fictional character that merely acts and reacts in response to life's fluctuating conditions - conditions which it can never quite comprehend.

It's like trying to play football when the length of the field keeps changing; and instead of one ball in play, there are twenty; and the players are either running on and off the field or sleeping on the grass. Nobody is really sure which game is being played and everybody plays by different rules. Now, anyone who was expected to be both player and referee could never find pleasure in such a game. He'd find his life on the field to be an endless exercise in fear, confusion, frustration and exhaustion.

The Eightfold Path guides, delimits, and establishes rules which are clear. Everyone can follow them.

The first step is Right Understanding.

Understanding requires both study and consultation with a Master.

Information acquired only through reading is never sufficient. Is the book accurate? If it is, do we truly comprehend what we've read? We cannot test ourselves. Think of what would happen if students devised their own tests and graded them, too. Everyone of them would get an A! But how many of them would really know their subject?

Many students of Chan read a book and then, by way of testing their comprehension, engage their friends in sophomoric arguments or regale them with lordly pronouncements. Teachers say of these discussions, "In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king."

A good teacher is indispensable. A good teacher engages us and determines if we understand what we've studied.

If we are unclear about a passage in a book, we cannot question the book. If we disagree with certain views of a teacher, we cannot skip over his instruction the way we can skip over troublesome paragraphs. It's often necessary to consult with a good teacher. There is no substitute for regular, face to face interactions.

You know, there was once a sailor who, while on leave, met the girl of his dreams. He fell madly in love with her. Unfortunately, he had to return to his ship to finish the two years of his enlistment. So he thought, "I'll not let her forget me. Every day I'll write to her. If nothing else, she'll love me for my fidelity."

Everyday, wherever he was, he wrote to her; and when he returned two years later, he learned that along about his two hundredth letter, she had married the mailman!

Dear Friends, don't be like that poor sailor who relied on the written word to achieve an understanding. Find a master who will meet regularly with you. Open your heart to him. The better he gets to know you, the better he will be able to advise and instruct you.

The second step is Right Thought.

Right Thought requires us to become aware of our motivations. Always we must inquire why we want to have something or why we want to do something, and we must be ruthless in our inquiry. If a friend wanted to purchase something he couldn't afford or to do something that was bad for him, we would give him sound advice, cautioning him, helping him to see the likely outcome of his foolish desires. Can we not be that kind of friend to ourselves? Can we not apply ordinary common sense to our own desires?

Careful investigation will illuminate our situation:

The Warlord T'ien Chi and the King of Ch'i enjoyed the sport of horse racing. Regularly they met to race their horses.

Now, each had three classes of horses. The third class was the draft horse. These are the horses that pull wagons. They are big and strong but very slow.

The second class was the cavalry horse, these are the horses upon which lancers, archers, and swordsmen are mounted. These horses are strong and reasonably fast; but they are older because they require years of training.

The first class of horse was the young thoroughbred upon which noblemen and high officers would be mounted. This class of horse was light and very fast.

So, whenever the King and the Warlord held a racing contest, they would race all their 3rd classes horses against each other, then they'd race their second class horses, and last, they'd race their first class thoroughbreds.

Now, the King was very rich and possessed much better horses than the warlord. So naturally he won all the races.

In his frustration, Warlord T'ien Chi appealed to Sun Ping, a wise descendant of Sun Tzu - Sun Tzu wrote the famous "Art of War". T'ien Chi asked Sun Pin, "Please advise me. How can I win against the King?"

The wise man thought for a moment. Then he said, "Sir, I suggest that when the King sends his third class horses into competition, you send in your second class horses to race against them. When the King sends in his second class horses, you send in your first class horses; and when the King sends in his first class horses, you send in your third class. You will win two out of three races."

The answer was simple, but why couldn't the warlord figure it out for himself? Because his ego had gotten him too emotionally involved in the competition. He didn't step back from his situation and look at it objectively. He didn't apply Right Thought.

Dear Friends, be ruthless in your examination of your desires. Apply to yourself the same common sense you would use to counsel a friend.

The third step is Right Speech.

How often do we impress words into the ego's service. To gain some advantage, we gossip, or we exaggerate, or we neglect to tell the whole story, or we insinuate the probable guilt of others while protesting our own inviolable innocence. Sometimes, just to be the center of attention, many of us will tell sordid tales or smutty jokes.

We think that words are not deeds, that they have little power and a short life, that somehow words just evaporate with the breath that speaks them. But words do have power and they can live forever; and, furthermore, they can heal as well as harm.

Just as Right Speech discourages us from uttering falsehoods, insults, accusations, or from bragging about our own accomplishments, it also encourages us to speak words of comfort, to utter words of forgiveness, to express acknowledgment and appreciation for the accomplishments of others.

Never underestimate the power of words. Let me tell you an old story which illustrates their power:

It was a beautiful day in Spring and many people had come to the park to see the green grass and the flowering trees and plants. Among the people who came were two blind beggars.

The first beggar had a sign that read, "I am blind." Most people just walked past him and kept on admiring the view.

The second beggar did much better. Nearly everyone who passed him put a coin in his cup. Some people who had walked past him without giving actually turned around to go back and give him a coin.

His sign read, "It is May - and I am Blind!"

Dear Friends, when deciding to speak or not to speak, think about that blind man who saw how much difference one little phrase can make!

The fourth step is Right Action.

Right action contains the Precepts.

1. The Buddhist vows to be nonviolent. This does not mean that he cannot defend his life or the lives of those persons who are in his care but that he cannot initiate hostile actions against others.

But what about himself? He, also, is one of the people against whom he may take no hostile action.

Peace is not merely the absence of war. Anxiety is not an aggressive state, but it isn't peaceful, either. The fellow who's in a coma is not at war, but he's not at peace, either. Peace is a state that is deliberately achieved and maintained.

It is not enough merely to be nonviolent; we must also act to promote harmony, well-being, and good health.

Smoking, for example, is inimical not only to the smoker's health but to the health of all around him. On both counts, then, smoking is forbidden by the precept against violence.

Whenever possible, a Buddhist should abstain from eating meat. I say `whenever possible' because this rule is not absolute. Many people, for example, live in arctic regions where they have no choice but to eat fish and other marine creatures. They cannot grow gardens in the tundra; and we cannot deny the Dharma to human beings because their environment does not conduce to vegetarian diets. But where vegetables are plentiful, there is no reason to eat meat.

On the positive side, a vegetarian diet promotes good health and for this reason, also, it should be followed.

Exercise, particularly Tai Ji Quan or Qi Gong, releases aggression and anger and also has a salubrious effect on the body. Yoga is also very beneficial.

2. The Buddhist vows to be truthful, not only in his social life, but in his business life as well. All forms of cheating and chicanery are included in this Precept. Whenever we sacrifice truth in order to gain some imagined advantage, we enter a tangled, convoluted world:

In Tokyo there were two merchants who after years of competitive conniving and deceit thoroughly distrusted each other.

One day they met at the railroad station. The first merchant asked, "Where are you going?"

The second merchant thought for a moment and answered, "To Kobe."

The first merchant gasped, "You liar! You tell me you are going to Kobe because you want me to think you are going to Osaka; but I have made inquiries, and I know you ARE going to Kobe!"

Dear Friends, this is the destination of even the smallest deceit. Our reputations are like the label on a shipping box. Once we are known as liars and cheaters, we consign our intentions, no matter how innocent, to the place of doubt and mistrust.

3. The Buddhist vows not to appropriate property which is not his own. This is the Precept against stealing.

Some people think that this Precept involves only cat- burglars and pickpockets. So long as they are not "breaking and entering" or purse-snatching, they think they needn't worry about this Precept. And for this reason, they feel no twinge of remorse about acts of petty theft or other misappropriations of property.

But what is an unpaid debt? Is this not stealing? What is borrowing something and not returning it? Is this also not stealing? What is using another person's property and damaging it without compensating him for the damage? Is this not stealing?

Sometimes we act as if we are entitled to appropriate the property of one person because another person has appropriated our property. The Golden Rule

says that we should do to others what we would want them to do to us. It doesn't say that we may do to others what others have done to us.

It is because we excuse or overlook our own larcenies that we feel no need to repent of them.

According to ancient wisdom, "The thief is sorry he is to be hanged - not that he is a thief."

If, before we committed any act, we examined its ethics and its possible results, we would never need to worry about the gallows.

4. The Buddhist vows to be sexually moral, modest, and responsible.

In this one Precept we can see how easy it is to break all the others. In the cause of his lust, a man will steal. In the cause of his lust, he will ply the woman he desires with alcohol and deceive her with false promises. And when he uses and abuses her body in such a way, is he not harming her?

And as greatly as we condemn immorality, so greatly do we praise morality. Much honor attends the virtuous person, the person who is chaste in his single life or faithful to his sacred marriage vows!

It is in the failure to observe the Precept of morality that we find the worst hypocrites. How often do we encounter a man who ferociously guards his own daughters, while conniving to debauch other men's daughters? Or, who strictly guards his own wife, while casually seducing another man's wife? If he were to kill a man who defiled his daughters or wife, he would expect the Courts to see him as a victim and to absolve him of guilt. Yet, when it is he who debauches and seduces, he regards himself as heroic. Is this not a sad and terrible truth?

It is not easy for a man to overcome lust. The temptations are ubiquitous and infinite in variety. Yet, if any man were to divert some of the energy he squanders on sexual conquests into conquering his own lust, he would make true spiritual progress.

All honorable men concur on the struggle's severity. Even the Buddha said, "If I had had another obstacle as difficult to overcome as my sexuality, I never would have made it."

The Buddha's good humor and self-deprecating candor should give us all encouragement.

5. The Buddhist vows to abstain from the use of alcohol or other intoxicants.

There are those who say, "An occasional drink won't hurt anyone." But an occasional drinker is still a drinker. It is rather like the state of being "a little pregnant." Either there is a pregnancy or there isn't.

The description "occasional" is an unlocked door which any thief can enter. Either sobriety's door is locked or it isn't. Experience tells us that the best way to solve a problem is to avoid it. Complete abstention is the best way to observe and guard this Precept.

The occasional drinker can remain sober when he's not beset by problems; but as soon as he's under serious stress, he may easily succumb to the dead-end escape of alcohol. Once he is captured by drink, he discovers that one drink is too many and a hundred drinks are not enough.

Alcohol relaxes our inhibitions so that we may indulge our egos. It allows us to override the rules of decorum and decency and then to blame our misconduct on the drink - not on our having taken the drink in the first place. Of course, we tell ourselves that we took that drink in order to enjoy ourselves; but when we drink and dull our senses, how can we enjoy a pleasure? And even if we could, what value is there in experiencing a pleasure that we cannot later remember or savor?

We often find that an intoxicated man who commits an immoral act will afterwards, when sober, regard himself with disgust; but then this same man will use that self-disgust as an excuse to drink again.

Let him instead become aware of his true nature, his Glorious Buddha Self. Let him instead learn that within himself he will find truth, peace, joy and freedom. Assure him that if it were possible to grow these on a vine and put them in a bottle, we should all be vintners and sots.

Dear friends, there is an old saying, "In Vino Veritas" which means "In wine there is truth" providing we drink enough of it. But the only truth we ever find when we overindulge in wine is that life in Samsara is bitter and painful.

The fifth step is Right Livelihood.

Obviously, if we can't participate in illegal activities for fun, we certainly can't participate in them for profit.

But any livelihood that is honest is honorable. Honest work is honest work. There are no noble occupations and no ignoble occupations. But for some reason this isn't so elementary a concept as it seems.

In India, for example, there has traditionally been a caste system. There's a priest class, and a warrior class, and a merchant class, and a worker class, and,

down at the very bottom, a class of untouchables or social outcasts. In whatever caste a person is born, he remains. He can't jump around from job to job. No matter how talented or intelligent he is, if he's born into a family of farm laborers, that's the only work he's permitted to do. He's not even allowed to socialize outside his caste. The system's not so rigid today, but in the Buddha's time the rules were inviolable.

Despite this, the Buddha refused to participate in such an unjust system. He wouldn't follow the rules at all. People liked that about him. He was a prince, but he wouldn't discriminate against others who were more lowly born. And actually, most everyone he met was more lowly born. When you're a prince you don't have too many social superiors.

So the Buddha wasn't influenced at all by a person's occupation or social rank. The Buddha, you see, possessed the "Eye of Discernment". No pious fraud could fool him. He only had to look at a person to see just how holy that person was. Not too many people have this gift.

It so happened that near Shravasti there was an outcast named Sunita, a man so low on the social scale that he was not permitted to work for a living. He was an untouchable and nobody would dare break the caste rules to hire him. So Sunita earned money for food by being a flower scavenger. Every day, he'd go to the town dump and rummage through discarded flower bouquets searching for that occasional flower which inexplicably manages to stay fresh while all the others have wilted.

Sunita would arrange all the scavenged flowers into a bouquet and sell it to people who passed on the road.

There may have been other people in Shravasti who were just as poor as Sunita, but certainly there was no one who was poorer. Yet despite his poverty, Sunita had attained enlightenment. He was a gentle and loving man. Needless to say, he had heard the Buddha preach and was a devout believer.

One day, in a procession, the Buddha came down the road near the dump where Sunita was picking through the trash.

As soon as Sunita saw the procession approach, he quickly crouched behind a rock. But the Buddha had already seen Sunita, and with his Eye of Discernment he recognized an enlightened being.

"Hello, there!" he called to the crouched man. "Please, stand up and let me see you."

Abashed, Sunita slowly stood up, keeping his head bowed and his hands prayerfully pressed together before his face.

"Why were you crouched behind that rock?" the Buddha asked.

"Blessed One," said Sunita, "I didn't want the sight of me to offend your eyes. I am unworthy of your glance."

Many people in the Buddha's procession agreed. They tugged at his sleeve, trying to get him to continue walking away from the outcast. "He's unclean," they said. "He's just a trash picker, an untouchable!"

"Is he?" said the Buddha stepping across some refuse to put his arm around Sunita's shoulder. "Look! I have touched him, and still he lives."

Then the Buddha asked Sunita, "Good Sir, if you are not too fond of this labor, could I induce you to come to assist me in my ministry? I could use a good worker like you."

With tears streaming down his face, Sunita agreed. And it is said that for the rest of his life, in accordance with the Buddha's wishes, Sunita always stayed close to the Buddha's side, where the Buddha could reach out and touch him.

The sixth step is Right Effort.

We exert Right Effort when we discontinue bad habits and practices and develop good ones. This is easier to say than to do.

We know that skill comes with practice, but in order to practice the spiritual lessons we have learned, we need to find opportunities. In Chan we must become aware that every breath we take provides us with an opportunity for practice.

People think the world intrudes on them. They do not understand that they are the gatekeepers of their own minds, that they can easily shut and lock the doors to their minds. If people intrude, it is because the gatekeeper has left the doors open.

Some people who cannot control their own minds strive instead to control the minds of others. They find it less daunting to try to direct the thoughts of hundreds of other people than to direct their own thoughts. This situation is what the Buddha had in mind when he said that the man who conquers ten thousand men in battle is not so great a hero as the man who conquers himself.

Everyday, in all our interactions, we must act to further our goal of enlightenment and self-awareness. If we have acquaintances whose company leads us easily into error, we should avoid contact with those acquaintances. If

we have insufficient time to meditate because we're too busy with clubs or hobbies or sports, we should cut back these activities.

It takes conscious effort to gain Chan tranquillity. Spiritual composure is gained by practice. A very wise man once noted that the mind of a true Man of Chan cannot be distressed or intimidated because, whether in good times or bad, it simply continues at its own steady pace, like a clock ticking in a thunderstorm. I like that. We should all try to be like clocks that even in thunderstorms just keep on ticking.

The seventh step is Right Mindfulness.

In addition to keeping our minds focused on our mantra whenever we have undertaken to follow this method and in observing the disciplined thoughts required to discriminate the real from the false should we have chosen this method, we must also remain mindful of the causes and effects of all our actions.

Dear friends, we should never allow a day to pass without reflecting upon our conduct. Have we done all we could to be kind and helpful to others and to put them at their ease? Have we acted in ways that are contrary to the Buddha Dharma? Have we been petty or mean? proud or lazy? gluttonous or greedy? jealous or angry? Have we sullied ourselves or others with lascivious thoughts or words or actions?

It is not easy to see our own faults. Sometimes we strain to detect them but can see nothing.

At night, if we stand in a brightly lit room and try to look out a window at the dark landscape, all we'll see is our reflection in the glass. We'll see nothing more than what we already know - the image of ourselves and that small confined space in which we are enclosed. If we want to see beyond ourselves, we have to turn off the lights. We have to dim our egos or shut them off entirely. Only then will be we able to see through the glass.

The eighth step is Right Meditation.

1. The Hua Tou

Dear Friends, according to ancient wisdom: If a man wishes to be happy for an hour, he eats a good meal; If he wishes to be happy for a year, he marries; If he wishes to be happy for a lifetime, he grows a garden; If he wishes to be happy for eternity, he examines a Hua Tou.

What then is a Hua Tou?

Hua Tou means "head word" and we may contrast Hua Tou with Hua Wei which means "tail word". If a dog were to walk past us, then, before we saw the dog's body we would see its head; and after we saw the body we would see its tail. So far, so good. So the head word or Hua Tou is the point at which the thought originates - the point before it enters the "body" of ego-consciousness. The tail is a subsequent thought. We'll get to the tail word later.

In ancient times, it was regarded as sufficient merely to point to the stilled mind in order to realize Buddha Nature. Bodhidharma spoke of "quieting the mind" and the Sixth Patriarch talked about "perceiving Self-Nature". Both advocated a simple recognition of the mind's true state of undefiled purity. But pointing wasn't as simple as it sounded.

As the years passed and Chan became popular, people with differing degrees of ability were attracted to it. Many practitioners claimed to have found easy ways to reach exalted states of enlightenment. They boasted of possessing the Dharma's precious jewels, but the jewels they described they had merely seen in the possession of others.

True Chan masters could, of course, see right through such false claims; but beginners couldn't always tell a lie from the truth. The masters, worried about the confusing effect such bad information was having on new practitioners, decided to devise methods of authenticating and standardizing accomplishments.

One of the methods they devised was the Hua Tou.

So, what is a Hua Tou? It is a statement designed to concentrate our thoughts upon a single point, a point that exists in the Original Mind's "head", a point immediately before the thought enters our ego consciousness. It is a "source" thought.

Let us examine the Hua Tou, "Who is it who now repeats the Buddha's name?" Of all the Hua Tou questions, this is the most powerful. Now, this Hua Tou may be stated in many different ways, but all the ways indicate one basic question, "Who am I?" Regardless of how the question is stated, the answer must be found in the same place that it originated: in the source, the Buddha Self. The ego cannot answer it.

Obviously, quick and facile answers are worthless. When asked, "Who is it who now repeats the Buddha's name?" we may not retort, "It is I, the Buddha Self!" and let it go at that. For we must then ask, "Who is this I?" We continue our interrogations and our confrontations. A civil war goes on inside our mind. The ego fights the ego. Sometimes the ego wins and sometimes the ego loses. On and on we battle. What is it that makes my mind conscious of being me? What is my mind, anyway? What is consciousness?

Our questions become more and more subtle and soon begin to obsess us. Who am I? How do I know who I am? These questions go round and round in our minds like tired and angry boxers. Sometimes, we may want to quit thinking about the Hua Tou, but we find we can't get it out of our mind. The bell won't ring and let us rest. If you don't like pugilistic metaphors you could say that the Hua Tou begins to haunt us like a melody that we just can't stop humming.

So there we are - always challenged, always sparring. Needless to say, a Hua Tou should never degenerate into an empty expression. Many people think they can shadowbox with their Hua Tou and just go through the motions of engagement. While their minds are elsewhere, their lips say, "Who is repeating the Buddha's name? Who is repeating the Buddha's name? Who is repeating the Buddha's name?" This is the way of feisty parrots, not of Chan practitioners.

The Hua Tou has meaning. It is a question that has an answer and we must be determined to find that answer.

I know that "Who am I?" sounds like a simple question, one we ought to be able to answer without difficulty. But it is not an easy question to answer. Often it is extremely puzzling.

In fact, many people reach a point in life when, apart from any Chan technique, they really do begin to wonder who they are.

Let's, for example, consider a middle aged woman who might have reached the point where she's no longer sure of who she is. She's having what psychologists nowadays call "an identity crisis". Perhaps her children have grown up and moved away and her husband no longer finds her attractive. She is depressed and confused.

Suddenly she realizes that for her entire life she has identified herself in terms of her relationship to other people. She has always been somebody's daughter or sister or employee or friend or wife or mother. This woman now begins to wonder, Who am I when I'm not being someone's daughter, wife, mother and so on? Who exactly am I?

Perhaps she reviews her life and sees that when she was attending to the needs of one person, she wasn't available to satisfy the needs of another and that those who felt neglected by her, criticized her, while those who received her help, just accepted it as if they were somehow entitled to it. Being criticized on one hand, and being taken for granted on the other, has caused her much suffering.

Worse, she may realize that in satisfying the demands of these external social relationships, she neglected the requirements of her internal spiritual life.

Now she feels spiritually bankrupt and wonders why she invested so much of herself in others, why she saved nothing for her Buddha Self.

But a bond holds two parties together. It is not a one- way ligature. Is it not because we desire to be loved or respected, feared or admired that we allow or encourage these attachments? Is it not our desires for the people, places, and things of Samsaric existence that ultimately cause us bitterness and pain? Of course it is.

There was once a man who worked at a food market. Every day he would steal food and bring it home to his family. His wife and children grew strong and healthy and used the money they would otherwise have spent on food to purchase clothing and other objects. They told him he was the best husband and father anyone could have.

Soon, the man's brother, seeing this prosperity, asked him to steal food for him also; and the man complied. His brother praised him. "You are the best brother a man could have," he said.

Next, a friendly neighbor who was having financial problems begged him for help; and the man stole even more food. His neighbor was so grateful. "You are the best friend a man could have," he said.

The man felt important and appreciated. In his desire to be loved and respected, he did not realize that he had become a common thief.

Before long he was caught, tried, and convicted for the thefts. He was sentenced to spend years in jail.

Which of the people he had helped volunteered to take his place in jail for even one night of his sentence? None.

Which volunteered to make restitution for even half of what he had provided? None.

Sadly the man learned that his family was embarrassed to admit being related to a thief. Sadly the man learned that his friend was voicing relief that a neighbor of such low character was now safely in jail.

And so, as we wonder who we really are we must reflect upon our ego's foolish desires and the pathetic ways it will grovel for affection.

When we ask, "Who am I?" we must also wonder whether we identify ourselves in terms of our wealth or social positions. What would happen if we lost our money or were cast out of society because of a flaw in our pedigree? Are we our bank accounts, our social circle, our lineage?

What about our jobs? Are we our occupations? If a musician injures his hand and can no longer play his instrument, does he cease to exist? Is he deprived of his humanity because he has been deprived of his identity as a musician?

Do we identify ourselves in terms of our nationalities, our cities, our neighborhoods, the language we speak, or the sports team we support? Do we lose part of ourselves if we move to a new locale?

Are we our bodies? If a man has a head, trunk, and four limbs, what happens if he loses two limbs? Is he only two thirds of a man? Think of how foolish this would be if he and his brother were equally to share an inheritance and his brother claimed that because he was missing an arm and a leg he was entitled to only two-thirds of his share!

May we define ourselves as our egos, our conscious sense of "I" or "me" or "mine"? What happens when we sleep? Do we cease to exist? What happens when our attention is completely focused on a problem or a drama or on some beautiful music? When happens when we meditate and completely lose our sense of I-ness? Do saints who attain a selfless state cease to exist? And Shakyamuni Buddha, who was so bereft of Siddhartha's personality that he could only be called "Tathagata" - the Suchness of Reality, Itself - did he cease to exist because he had no ego nature?

In trying to answer the Hua Tou, "Who am I?" or "Who is repeating the Buddha's name?" we must examine our illusive identities, our shifting, conditional, samsaric identities. The Hua Tou will then reveal much to us.

Dear friends, break old attachments! Dissolve prideful self-images and special relationships and create instead humble, generic varieties!

Don't require friends. Try merely to be someone who is friendly, someone who respects all people and treats them all with kindness and consideration.

Don't confine filial affection to just parents but be solicitous towards all elderly persons, and so on.

Once we detach ourselves from specific emotional relationships and extend ourselves to all humankind, a new strength of character begins to emerge.

The Hua Tou, "Who am I" is a Vajra Sword which, when wielded properly, will cut away the troublesome ego.

A Hua Wei or tail word traces a thought back to its origin. This, too, can be very useful. For example, a child, in the company of his friends, asks his

father a question, let's say, "Can we go to the seashore this weekend?" and his father answers roughly, "Don't bother me!" and pushes the child away causing him to feel embarrassment and the pain of rejection.

That answer can be a Hua Wei. The man must ask himself, Why did I answer my child in this way? Why was I suddenly so upset? He knows that before his child approached him, he was in a good mood. So what was there in the question that upset him?

He begins to retrace each of the words. Was it the word "weekend"? What does he associate with that word? If he can find nothing, he tries the word "seashore". He begins to recall his experiences at the seashore. He thinks of many events and suddenly he recalls one that disturbs him. He doesn't want to think about it, yet the Hua Wei discipline requires that he examine that event. Why does the memory disturb him? What was so unpleasant about it? He continues to investigate this event until he gets to the root cause of his distress.

Dear friends, that root cause will surely involve damage to his pride, his self-esteem. And so the man recalls and, in a way, relives the experience, only now he is able to see it from a different, more mature perspective. Perhaps that bitter experience actually involved harsh treatment he received from his own father! At any rate, he will surely see that he transferred the pain of his childhood seashore experience onto his innocent son. He will be able to make amends for his unkind rebuff, and in this way, his character will grow.

It occasionally happens that if the man concentrates on the Hua Wei enough, the dog may bite its own tail; and he may actually go from tail to head in one gulp.

Sometimes a Hua Tou functions as an instruction, a kind of guide that helps us to deal with life's problems. Such a Hua Tou sustains us and directs us as we travel the hard road to enlightenment.



You know, long ago Chan Master Hui Jue of Lang Ye Mountain had a woman disciple who came to him for instruction. The master gave her the Hua Tou, "Let it be." He told her that if she faithfully used this Hua Tou

as a scythe, she would cut down illusions and reap enlightenment.

The woman had faith in her master and, being resolute in her determination to succeed, she sharpened and honed this Hua Tou. Let it be. Let what be? Who let's it be? What is being? On and on she honed the blade. Her house burned down and when people came running to tell her she gently closed her eyes and whispered, "Let it be." Her son drowned and when people came running to tell her she gently closed her eyes and whispered, "Let it be."

One day she started to prepare fritters for dinner. She got the batter ready and the oil hot. Then, when she poured a ladle of the batter into the hot oil, it sizzled. And this little sizzling noise reverberated in her mind, and she attained enlightenment! Right away she threw the pan of hot oil on the ground and began jumping up and down, clapping her hands, laughing and laughing. Her husband naturally thought that she had lost her mind. "What a calamity!" he shouted. "Whatever shall I do?" And his wife turned to him and said, "Let it be. Just let it be." Then she went to Master Hui Jue and he verified that she had indeed harvested the Holy Fruit.

Keep your mind on your Hua Tou whenever you are doing anything that does not require your undivided attention. Naturally, if you're flying an airplane you don't want to start thinking about your Hua Tou. Discovering whether or not a dog has Buddha Nature will not be of much use to you if you crash your plane. Driving an automobile is also something that requires your full attention. You may not risk killing other people's small selves just because you are trying to dispatch your own.

But there are many times during a day in which you can safely work on your Hua Tou. Usually we try to stuff these times with frivolous activity. We play silly games or do puzzles or listen to the radio or gossip or become spectators at some sporting event. These are the times that we should rivet our minds to our Hua Tou. No one can ever tell when the magical moment will arrive.

In China we call a cut of meat "pure meat". It is not mixed up with other ingredients as, for example, a sausage is. Sometimes "pure meat" means the best cut of meat. People always tell the butcher that's what they want. Pure or prime meat.

There was once a man who was considering the Hua Tou, "Who has Buddha Nature?" Everyday he had to pass a butcher shop on his way to work. He always heard people clamoring for "pure meat" but he never paid them much attention.

One day a woman was buying meat and, according to custom, she insisted that the butcher give her only pure meat. That was what she cried out. "Give me

only pure meat." Her insistence particularly irritated the butcher and he shouted, "Which piece is not pure?"

The man heard this angry shout and he suddenly realized that all the meat is pure meat, that is to say, everyone contains the pure Buddha Nature. Who has Buddha Nature? Hah! Who does not have Buddha Nature?

The man attained enlightenment in that very instant! He got so excited he hopped and jumped and kept on saying, "Which piece is not pure? Ah, hah! Which piece is not pure?" over and over again. "Which piece is not pure?" This craziness we call Chan Disease. It doesn't last very long, maybe only a few days before the victim calms down; but it is a wonderful disease to catch. Fortunately, there is no medicine to cure it.

A monk once asked Master Zhao Zhou, "What happens after a person finally grasps the nonsensory state?" Master Zhao Zhou replied, "He lays it down." The monk did not understand. So this quandary became his Hua Tou. "How can one lay down the absence of something?" He worked on this and worked on this and still he could not understand. So he returned to Master Zhao Zhou and asked, "How can one lay down the absence of something?" Master Zhao Zhou answered simply, "What you can't lay down, carry away." Instantly the monk was enlightened.

You see, Master Zhao Zhou knew that the only thing we can't lay down is our Buddha Self. This and this alone is all that we can truly carry with us. Sometimes you hear the expression, "You can't take it with you." Usually people mean that you must leave money or fame or power behind when you go to your grave. The ego, too, cannot be taken with you when you enter Nirvana.

Master Zhao Zhou was also telling the monk that the attainment of enlightenment is nothing a person can brag about. Nobody can say, "I am enlightened" because the experience of enlightenment is precisely an egoless experience. The ego is extinguished and the pure Buddha Self is experienced. There is no "I" there who can claim to be enlightened. This is a most exhilarating and salutary experience. Anyone who suffers from any of the ego's ills should try one dose of enlightenment. The cure is permanent.

2. Meditation on Sound

Before beginning this instruction, it is important, I think, to understand the difference between Host and Guest.

In the Surangama Sutra, Arya Ajnatakaundinya asks, "What is the difference between settled and transient?" He answers by giving the example of a traveler who stops at an inn. The traveler dines and sleeps and then continues on his way. He doesn't stop and settle there at the inn, he just pays his bill and

departs, resuming his journey. But what about the innkeeper? He doesn't go anywhere. He continues to reside at the inn because that is where he lives.

"I say, therefore, that the transient is the guest and the innkeeper is the host," says Arya Ajnatakaundinya.

And so we identify the ego's myriad thoughts which rise and fall in the stream of consciousness as transients, travelers who come and go and who should not be detained with discursive examinations. Our Buddha Self is the host who lets the travelers pass without hindrance. A good host does not detain his guests with idle chatter when they are ready to depart.

Therefore, just as the host does not pack up and leave with his guests, we should not follow our transient thoughts. We should simply let them pass, unobstructed.

Many people strive to empty their mind of all thoughts. This is their meditation practice. They try not to think. They think and think, "I will not think." This is a very difficult technique and one that is not recommended for beginners. Actually, the state of "no-mind" that they seek is an advanced spiritual state. There are many spiritual states that must precede it.

Progress in Chan is rather like trying to climb a high mountain. We start at the bottom. What is our destination? Not the summit but merely our base camp, Camp 1. After we have rested there, we resume our ascent. But again, our destination is not the summit, but merely Camp 2. We attempt the summit only from our final Camp.

Nobody would dream of trying to scale Mount Everest in one quick ascent. And the summit of Chan is higher than Everest's! Yet in Chan, everybody wants to start at the end. Nobody wants to start at the beginning. If beginners could take an airplane to the top they would, but then this would not be mountain climbing, would it? Enthusiasm for the achievement is what makes people try to take shortcuts. But the journey is the real achievement.

A better way than deliberately trying to blank the mind by preventing thoughts from arising is to meditate on sound. In this method we calmly sit and let whatever sounds we hear pass in one ear and out the other, so to speak. We are like good innkeepers who do not hinder guest-thoughts with discursive chatter. If we hear a car honk its horn, we merely record that noise without saying to ourselves, "That horn sounds like Mr. Wang's Bentley! I wonder where he's going!" Or, if we hear a child shouting outside, we just let the shout pass through our mind without saying, "Oh, that noisy boy! I wish his mother would teach him better manners."

You know, in some styles of Chan, it is the custom to strike someone with a stick if he begins to show signs of sleepiness. Up and down the aisles patrols a fellow with a stick. No one is allowed to move or make any breathing noises or, heaven forbid!, to nod sleepily. The fellow with the stick will strike him! This is foolish and, in truth, violates the First Precept of nonviolence.

What shall we do when an elderly nun or priest begins to slumber in the Meditation Hall? Should we strike him with a stick? Are we confusing laziness with sleepiness? Perhaps the sleepy person has been up most of the night tending to the sick. Should we punish him if, in his exhaustion, he begins to drift into sleep? No. We should offer him some strong tea. If he wants to perk up, he drinks the tea. But if he takes a little catnap we should let him rest. Perhaps a person's noisy breathing or restlessness is actually a symptom of illness. Should we punish the sick person and add to his discomfort? No. This is not the Chan way.

What should we do once, of course, we are sure that his noisiness has not arisen from fatigue or illness? We should use the sound of his breathing or his movements as we would use the sound of an auto's horn or a child's shout. We should just register the noise without thinking about it at all. We should not let our ego get involved in the noise. Just let it pass through our minds unhindered, like a guest at an inn. A guest enters and departs. We don't rummage through the guest's belongings. We don't detain it with gossip or idle chatter.

You know, the Buddha once asked Manjushri to choose between the different methods of attaining enlightenment. "Which was the best?" he asked. Manjushri easily chose Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva's method of using the faculty of hearing as the best.

Always remember that when meditating on sound it is essential to remove the ego from the listening process and to let the non-judgmental Buddha Self record the sounds that enter our ears. In whatever place we do this, we make that place a Bodhimandala, a sacred place in which enlightenment may be obtained.

We do not need to be in a mediation hall to practice this technique. Every day, in all of our ordinary activities, wherever we happen to be, we can practice it. We shouldn't try to limit our practice of Chan to those times in which we are in a Chan Meditation Hall. In fact, the function of a meditation hall is really only to provide a place of minimal distraction for those people who have difficulty in keeping their attention focused on what they are doing.

Sometimes people like to go to meditation halls because they need to be forced to meditate. They won't practice at home alone. Why should a person have to be forced to have a beautiful experience? How foolish this is!

Sometimes people go to meditation halls because they want to meet friends there. This is a misuse of Chan. It is converting Chan from a Path to Enlightenment into just another dead-end, Samsaric trail; and isn't that a pity?

3. Meditation on a Specific Object

Sometimes a guest is not a transient. Sometimes a guest comes to the inn with the intention of staying awhile. Well, then the host must pay him special attention.

The innkeeper does not investigate the guest-object before he lets him sign the register. This is another way of saying that before sitting down to meditate we do not go and study the object that we will be meditating on.

Suppose we pick as our object a rose. This is a particularly nice object for Chan meditation because, after all, roses are one of China's gifts to world horticulture.

A rose can engage our senses in many ways.

After we have attained calmness and regulated our breathing, we begin by gently closing our eyes and trying to construct a rose in our mind. We do not allow ourselves to digress into personal recollections about roses.

We see a stem - how long it is, how thick, how green, and so on. We see thorns, their shape, their points, their arrangements on the stem. Again, we don't digress into thinking about specific occasions when we were stuck by thorns. Perhaps we gingerly feel the thorn, but only in our mind. Then we come to the various parts of the flower. Depending on our knowledge of botany we assemble the flower... pistil, stamen, petals, and so on. The petals are so soft. What color are they? The pollen is so yellow and powdery. We see the yellow dust on nearby petals. A rose has fragrance. What is the specific scent of our rose? We actually begin to smell it.

This is how to meditate on a rose or on any object. Remember, we never allow ourselves to digress into "Roses I have known..." or instances in the past when roses were given or received. No thinking at all! We just become aware of a rose in all its parts and sensations.

Soon, the rose will glow in our mind. The rose will be of such exquisite beauty that we will know we have seen the Ideal Rose of Heaven, itself. Afterwards, we may squeal with delight. Not many people are permitted to view one of Heaven's treasures.

4. Meditation on the Buddha's Name

In Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha Amitabha, the Buddha of the West, is very important. Chinese people pronounce Amitabha Amitofo. And so, repeating the name Amitofo is an excellent practice.

First, we keep in our mind an image of the Buddha Amitabha. We also acknowledge our great debt to him. Did not the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara-Guan Yin spring from his brow? Where would Mahayana salvation be without our beloved Guan Yin? So we keep the Buddha in our mind as we repeat his sacred name.

What is the wrong way to repeat the Buddha's name? That's easy to describe. Think of a sick person who is given a bottle of penicillin pills. Think of him sitting there holding the unopened bottle repeating "penicillin, penicillin, penicillin". Will that cure him? No. He must take the penicillin into himself. He must swallow and assimilate it. Merely repeating the name of the medicine will not cure him.

CHAPTER 4: THE BUDDHA'S FLOWER SERMON



A good teacher is better than the most sacred books. Books contain words, and Chan cannot be transmitted by mere words. I suppose you will think, "Well, if this old man says that words are useless, why does he talk so much?" Religion has many mysteries and why teachers say that words can never suffice and then talk and talk until their students' ears turn to stone is perhaps the greatest mystery of them all.

The Buddha stood beside a lake on Mount Grdhakuta and prepared to give a sermon to his disciples who were gathering there to hear him speak.

As the Holy One waited for his students to settle down, he noticed a golden lotus blooming in the muddy water nearby. He pulled the plant out of the water - flower, long stem, and root. Then he held it up high for all his students to see. For a long time he stood there, saying nothing, just holding up the lotus and looking into the blank faces of his audience.

Suddenly his disciple, Mahakashyapa, smiled. He understood!

What did Mahakashyapa understand? Everybody wants to know. For centuries everybody's been asking, "What message did the Buddha give to Mahakashyapa?"

Some people say that the root, stem, and flower represented the Three Worlds: underworld, earth, and sky, and that the Buddha was saying that he could hold all existence in the palm of his hand. Maybe.

Some people say he was reversing the Great Mantra, "Mani Padme hum." The Jewel is in the Lotus. When the Buddha held the flower in his hand, the Lotus was in the Jewel. Hmmm.

Some people say that the root, stem, and flower stood for the base, spine, and thousand-petaled lotus crown of the Chakra Yoga system and that by raising the plant he was advocating that discipline. Other people say it could just as easily indicate a result of that discipline, the Trinitarian fulfillment: as the Buddha was Father and Mother, he was also Son - the Lotus Born and Lotus Holding Maitreya, Future Buddha, the Julai! Hmmmm. That's certainly something to think about!

In Chan we're not sure of too many things. We only really know one: Enlightenment doesn't come with a dictionary! The bridge to Nirvana is not composed of phrases. As old Master Lao Zi wrote, "The Dao that we can talk about is not the Dao we mean."

So the Buddha spoke in silence, but what did he say?

Perhaps he was saying, "From out of the muck of Samsara the Lotus rises pure and undefiled. Transcend ego-consciousness! Be One with the flower!"

There! The Buddha gave a lecture and nobody had to take any notes.

CHAPTER 5 : STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT



What stages do we pass through as we progress towards enlightenment?

First, as we meditate, we may experience a moment of utter purity and lightness. We may even feel that our body is beginning to levitate or that our mind is rising up right out of our body so that we can look down and see ourself sitting below. These experiences are very strange to learn about, and stranger still to experience. What is strangest of all is that so many people experience them.

Second, we may experience a state of egoless purity in which we merely witness the objects and events of our environment, without being in any way affected by them. Sensory data do not reach us. We remain as unaffected by events around us as a stone resting in water. Whenever we reach this state we should strive to remain aware and alert and conscious of the experience.

Third, we may hear a great clap of thunder which nobody else hears, yet we could swear it shook the entire house. Or the sound we alone hear may be like the buzzing of a bee or the note of a distant trumpet. These auditory experiences would be very unusual to the average person, but to the person who practices Chan, they're quite ordinary.

Whenever we have a strange, inexplicable experience - a vision, perhaps, we should discuss it with a master and not with others who may mislead out of ignorance or malice. Too often a Chan practitioner who hasn't been able to get anywhere in his own program will denigrate the experience of someone else.

What should we do when we can't meditate at all, when we sit down and experience only restlessness? We should approach ourselves gently as if we were children. If a child were learning to play a musical instrument, he would not be taught musical theory and notation and the particulars of his instrument and an entire composition all at once. No, a child would be taught incrementally, with short instruction sessions and short practice sessions. This is the best way. An accomplished musician can easily practice eight hours each day, but not a beginner. A beginner needs to achieve a continuing series of small successes. In that way he cultivates patience, confidence and enthusiasm. A long series of

small successes is better than a short series of failures. We should set small goals for ourselves; and we shouldn't task ourselves with larger goals until we have mastered all the little ones.

Beyond meditation practice, there is attitude. A beginner must learn to cultivate what is called, "the poise of a dying man". What is this poise? It is the poise of knowing what is important and what is not, and of being accepting and forgiving. Anyone who has ever been at the bedside of a dying man will understand this poise. What would the dying man do if someone were to insult him? Nothing. What would the dying man do if someone were to strike him? Nothing. As he lay there, would he scheme to become famous or wealthy? No. If someone who had once offended him were to ask him for his forgiveness would he not give it? Of course he would. A dying man knows the pointlessness of enmity. Hatred is always such a wretched feeling. Who wishes to die feeling hatred in his heart? No one. The dying seek love and peace.

There was a time when that dying man indulged himself with feelings of pride, greed, lust and anger, but now such feelings are gone. There was a time when he indulged his bad habits, but now he is free of them. He carries nothing. He has laid his burdens down. He is at peace.

Dear friends, when we have breathed our last, this physical body of ours will become a corpse. If we strive now to regard this physical body as a corpse, that peace will come to us sooner.

If we regarded each day of our life as if it were our last day, we wouldn't waste one precious minute in frivolous pursuits or in grudging, injurious anger. We wouldn't neglect to show love and gratitude to those who had been kind to us. We wouldn't withhold our forgiveness for any offense, small or great. And if we had erred, wouldn't we ask for forgiveness, even with our dying breath?

Well then, if this is the great difficulty for a beginner, what obstacle does an intermediate practitioner face? Results! After he cultivates the discipline of the Buddha Dharma, he must continue to tend his garden as he awaits the ripening of the Holy Fruit! However, his waiting must be passive waiting. He cannot expect or schedule the harvest season. In farming, it is possible to estimate how long beans will take to mature or apples to ripen. But Enlightenment will come when it will come.

When it comes, the meditator will suddenly experience his True Nature. He will also understand that his ego truly is a creature of fiction, a harmful illusion. Now, with confusion eliminated, he will become imperturbable. He will develop a singleness of mind, a oneness that will shine in purity and be absolute in tranquillity. Naturally, when he reaches this stage, he must act to preserve this Diamond Eye of Wisdom. He must be vigilant in not allowing his

ego to reassert itself since to do so would be a foolish attempt to graft a second useless head onto his neck.

Whenever we reach the egoless state of perfect awareness, we find it impossible to describe. The situation's rather like an observer who watches a fellow drink a glass of water. Was the water warm or cool? The observer can't tell but the fellow who's done the drinking does know. If the observer disagrees, can they argue about it? No. Can we debate enlightenment with the unenlightened? No. Such discussions would be futile. Chan Master Lin Ji used to say, "Fence with fencing masters. Discuss poetry with poets." A person who has reached the egoless state can communicate this experience only to someone else who has reached it.

But after Enlightenment, then what?

After Enlightenment, we experience the Great Bodhisattva adventure. In our meditations we enter Guan Yin's realm. This is the most wonderful world of all.

But after this, the accomplished practitioner must separate himself from Chan, graduate, so to speak, and be what he has studied to become: a person who seems to be quite ordinary, just another face in the crowd. Who would guess that this face is an Original Face? Who would guess that this person has been one person and two persons and then three persons and now is one person again, a person who is living out the life of the Buddha Self? No one could guess from merely looking.

And so the final problem the practitioner faces is actually to enter the Void that beginning students like to theorize about. He must attain "no-mind". Instead of proceeding in any one direction, he has to expand in all directions, or as Han Shan (Cold Mountain) would say, "into infinity". In Chan we also call this "letting go of the hundred-foot pole".

Chan is a slippery hundred-foot pole. It is difficult to climb. But once a practitioner does find himself sitting on top of it, what does he do next? He lets go. He steps off into empty space. He cannot cling to Chan. He has discovered what it means to be egoless, but now he must live out the results of that discovery. His actions can't be deliberate and contrived. And so he achieves spontaneity and becomes one with reality. No need to struggle further.

So, gaining Chan is the difficult task when we begin; and letting go of Chan is the difficult task when we end.

The woman or man of Chan doesn't sit atop the hundredfoot pole and stare at his Enlightenment diploma. He reads the diploma, shouts "Kwatz!", and tosses the diploma to the four winds. Then he jumps off the pole into infinity.

Dear friends, although enlightenment may be reached by entering many different Dharma doors, the Buddha, the Six Patriarchs, and all the Chan Ancestors are in agreement that the most wonderful of all portals is the Door of Chan.

CHAPTER 6: DIFFICULTIES



Sometimes the teaching of Chan can be as frustrating as the learning of it:

There was once a Chan Master who undertook the instruction of three novices. He explained to them the need for spiritual discipline and ordered that, starting from that very moment, they observe the rule of absolute silence. Then, holding his finger to his lips, he ordered them to go to their rooms.

The first novice said, "Oh, Master, please let me tell you how grateful I am to receive your instruction!"

Whereupon the second novice said, "You fool! Don't you realize that by saying that you broke the rule of silence?"

And the third novice threw his hands up and wailed, "Lord! Am I the only person around here who can follow orders?"

Sometimes we look around and suppose that nobody else measures up to our standards. We are like those three novices. Often, like that first novice, we say we want to learn but then we don't really pay attention to what our books or teachers tell us. Or, like the second novice, we understand the rules but think that they apply only to others. Or like the third novice, we clamor for praise every time we do what we're supposed to do.

Sometimes we share the frustration of that Chan master.

Perhaps we see inattention, laziness, frivolity, or intellectual smugness. Worse, we may see people who are accomplished hypocrites - people who pretend that their interests are purely spiritual while in fact they are a ninety nine percent amalgam of pride, greed and lust. And then we throw up our hands in dismay and conclude that the Golden Age of Chan is over. We're too late. There is no hope for Chan. We came just in time for the funeral. Every age thinks that it has just missed being included in the Golden Age of Enlightenment.

Master Yong Jia, who studied under Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng, worried about the future of Chan. He despaired of the profusion of worldly men and the scarcity of sincere followers of the Buddha Dharma. "Alas!" he cried in his Song of Enlightenment, "In this time of decadence and worldly evil, no one cares to submit to discipline. The Holy Period's over and the Era of Perversion has begun."

Now, Master Yong Jia, for all his worries about being in an era of darkness, managed to attain enlightenment in a very short time. He was what you'd call an "Overnight Sensation." In fact that's how Hui Neng referred to him. "The Overnight Enlightened One!" Master Yong Jia's lamp burned for a long time in what was supposed to be a dark era.

Master Wei Shan who was born in 771 and died in 863 saw his earthly life end just as the Tang Dynasty's Golden Age of Chan was ending. Master Wei Shan used to lament, "Isn't it regrettable that we were born at the end of the Enlightenment Period?" He despaired of the profusion of worldly men and the scarcity of sincere followers of the Buddha Dharma. How he wished that he had been born earlier! He truly feared that there would be no one to take his place.

But let's take a moment to recall how Wei Shan got to be called Wei Shan.

Wei Shan's original name was Ling You and he was from FuJian Province. He studied Chan under Master Bai Zhang Huai Hai.

Now, Master Bai Zhang Huai Hai had been born back in the middle of the Tang Dynasty; but he also despaired of the profusion of worldly men and the scarcity of sincere followers of the Buddha Dharma.

Bai Zhang Huai Hai was so upset about the state of Chan that he decided to solve the problem by starting a new monastery on Mount Wei, Wei Shan, which is in Hunan Province. Naturally, since he thought that there were so few enlightened men available, he supposed that he'd have to go there and do the job himself.

One day while he was trying to figure out just how he would accomplish this feat, the old ascetic soothsayer Si Ma happened to pay him a visit.

"Give me your advice," asked Bai Zhang Huai Hai. "First, what do you think about building a new monastery on Mount Wei?"

"Excellent idea," said Si Ma. "It's an ideal location and can easily support a community of fifteen hundred monks."

Bai Zhang Huai Hai was delighted to hear this. But then Si Ma added, "Don't get any ideas about going there yourself. The mountain is young and strong and you're old and weak. You'll have to send somebody else."

But who? Bai Zhang Huai Hai couldn't imagine that anyone around could replace him.

Si Ma tried to help. "Let's see who you've got available," he said.

So, one by one Bai Zhang Huai Hai summoned all his monks. Naturally, he started with his head monk.

Si Ma took one look at the head monk and shook his head, rejecting him. He continued to reject each of the various candidates until finally it was Ling You's turn to be interviewed. When Si Ma saw Ling You, he nodded his approval. "This is the man!" he said. "Send him to Wei Shan."

The head monk didn't like this judgment very much and asked Master Bai Zhang Huai Hai to affirm the decision by examination, that is, to let each candidate actively demonstrate the depth of his Chan.

So Bai Zhang Huai Hai held a contest. He put a pitcher in the middle of the floor and one by one invited his monks to come into the room and answer the question: "Without calling this object a pitcher, what should it be called?"

His head monk came in, looked at the pitcher, thought for a minute and then answered, "Well, it can't be called a wedge." Bai Zhang Huai Hai was disappointed. This obviously contrived answer showed that the head monk was approaching the problem too intellectually. He was still too involved with names and forms.

Every candidate gave an unsatisfactory answer until, finally, it was Ling You's turn. Ling You came into the room and when Bai Zhang Huai Hai asked, "Without calling this object a pitcher, what should it be called?" Ling You spontaneously gave the pitcher such a kick it shattered against the wall. Bai Zhang Huai Hai threw back his head and laughed. Si Ma was right. Ling You was indeed the man. A pitcher? So much for name! So much for form!

So you see, teachers, too, sometimes need to learn a lesson. Bai Zhang Huai Hai thought that the glorious days of Chan were all in the past. He was wrong. Ling You went to the mountain and founded a monastery and that is how he came to be known as the great Master Wei Shan.

Over a thousand years have passed since that contest and Chan masters are still despairing of the profusion of worldly men and the scarcity of sincere followers of the Buddha Dharma.

Take my own case. When I was young, most of the monasteries in the area south of the three rivers were destroyed during various rebellions. Many monks of the Zhong Nan mountains came south, on foot, to help rebuild these monasteries. What did they have? Nothing. They carried a gourd and a little basket and the clothes on their backs. That was all. Everybody wondered what on earth they could possibly accomplish. But they did the job. They rebuilt the monasteries.

Later as these monasteries flourished and more monks were needed, new monks began to arrive. They came in carts, needing yokes and poles to carry all their possessions. And everybody thought, "Oh, they are too worldly. They won't get anything done." But they did, didn't they?

And now, when I travel someplace and I see monks getting on trains and airplanes with their matched sets of leather luggage, I find myself saying, "Oh, they are too worldly. They won't accomplish anything." But they will, won't they?

You will, won't you?

CHAPTER 7: BREATHING AND POSTURE



Although we may perform many meditations while walking or working, when we do formally sit to meditate, we should be careful to maintain a reverent attitude and to sit and breathe correctly.

Dear friends, however many benefits we may derive from our efforts, meditation is a spiritual exercise, not a therapeutic regimen. We do not practice in order to counter psychological disturbances or to help us cope with the ego's frustrations. We meditate in order to transcend ego-consciousness and to realize our Buddha Self. Our intention is to enter Nirvana, not to make life in Samsara more tolerable.

This instruction can be confusing, I know. Many people think that they are meditating when they achieve a peaceful and quiet state. They look forward to practicing because they enjoy the hour or so of peace and quiet it gives them. But quietism is not meditation. Corralling a wild horse doesn't make him tame or responsive to the reins. He may rest for awhile and look tranquil. He may even begin to graze. But when the gate is opened he will escape - as wild as he ever was.

You know, at Nan Hua Si, the Sixth Patriarch's monastery, there was once a monk who spent hours each day sitting quietly on his cushion enjoying the peace and tranquillity it brought him. He thought that he was meditating. Hui Neng, the Sixth Patriarch, noticing the monk's error, approached him. "Why do you devote so much time to your cushion each day?" he asked.

The monk looked up, surprised. "Because I want to become a Buddha," he answered.

Hui Neng smiled. "My son," he said, "you can make a mirror polishing a brick sooner than you can make a Buddha sitting on a cushion!"

We should always remember this exchange between a great master and an erring monk.

Before we enter the meditative state we are always awake and alert. Our minds, freed from external cares, are focused on our meditation exercise. After

we succeed in entering the meditative state we are usually quite euphoric. This joyful giddiness is experienced by practitioners in every religion. It is called Chan Disease or God Intoxication or Divine Madness. Quietism doesn't produce euphoria. It produces a zombie-like dullness that has nothing whatsoever to do with Chan Buddhism or any other religion except, perhaps, voodoo.

We should never begin a meditation exercise if we are excited or agitated. The mind and body must come to a relaxed state. If we are angry, introspection and an application of Buddhist principles, particularly of forgiveness and acceptance, may help us to regain our composure; but if our distress persists we should pray for guidance or seek counsel in order to resolve our problems before sitting down to meditate.

If our agitation is merely a temporary condition, due perhaps to being rushed or fatigued, we should follow the "one-half inch incense stick" method. We simply sit quietly and watch an incense stick burn down for half an inch. If by that time our composure has not been restored, we should end the meditation session. We can always try again later.

Likewise, our breathing must be gentle and rhythmical. Occasionally, while we are practicing meditation, thoughts may arise which disturb us or we may gasp for air because we've incorrectly performed a breathing technique. Again, we should follow the "one-half inch incense stick" method and allow our mind and breath to settle down before resuming our practice.

Posture

A natural, relaxed but upright posture is the best posture. We sit without rigidity or pain. This is very important. Pain initiates a panic-response, a perceived emergency which causes the body's blood pressure and heart rate to rise; and under such conditions, meditation is impossible. However, anyone who is easily able to sit in a more formal meditation posture such as the lotus position, may use this posture to good advantage.

Of course, we must sit erectly so that our lungs can fully expand. We may not slump forward or sideways. If we find ourselves drifting into sleep, we should rouse ourselves with a few swallows of tea and by rocking from side to side a few times and taking a few deep breaths.

Failure to control body, mind, and breath may result in small harms, such as emotional or physical discomfort, or in great harms, such as strained muscles or fearful encounters with hallucinated demons which, I think we can all agree, are most distressing events.

Breathing Exercises

Before beginning any formal meditation technique it is absolutely necessary to gain control of the breath.

There are two basic approaches to breath control: unstructured and structured. In both methods the lungs are compared to a bellows. When we wish to fill a bellows with air, we pull the handles apart. In like manner, when we desire to inflate the chest, we begin by extending the abdomen, pushing it outward, away from the spine as though we were pulling apart the handles of a bellows. When we exhale, we first let the air seep out and then slowly contract the abdomen, squeezing the remaining air out of the lungs as if we were closing the bellows.

Always, our aim should be to make our breathing so fine and unstrained that if someone were to place an ostrich plume in front of our nose, we would not ruffle it when breathing in or out.

1. In unstructured breathing, we lower our gaze and simply follow the breath, counting ten successive breaths. If we lose count, we simply start again. When we complete ten counts or breath-cycles, we simply start a new ten-count.

We begin by focusing our attention on the inhalation, noticing the air as it enters the nose, descends down the throat and fills the lungs. We mentally watch the chest expand and the shoulders rise.

As we prepare to exhale, we take note of the count; and then we watch the air as it seeps out of our lungs through the nose. We note our shoulders as they relax and fall as our lungs are emptying. As we complete the exhalation, we observe our abdominal muscles contract. With practice, all of the muscles of our abdomen, groin and buttocks will contract to force out the residual air in the lungs.

For some reason, it is easier to count breath cycles when beginning to exhale than when beginning to inhale. But each of us is different. Counting inhalations or counting exhalations is a matter of personal choice.

2. In structured breathing, we inhale, retain the breath, exhale, and either begin a new cycle or else we hold the lungs empty before beginning another breath-cycle. The amount of time we allot to each part of the cycle, depends on the particular formula we follow. Because lung capacity varies from individual to individual, no single formula can suffice. The practitioners may select from several ratios:

a. The ratio, 4:16:8, requires that the inhalation take four counts, the retention take sixteen counts, and the exhalation take eight counts. The ratio, 4:16:8:4 requires an additional period in which the lungs are left empty for four counts. This is more difficult, but many practitioners find it more conducive to attaining deep meditative states.

Usually, one second per count is the prescribed cadence. However, some people have great difficulty in holding their breath, for example, for sixteen seconds. These individuals should then simply hold their breath for twelve seconds. With practice they will quickly achieve the count of sixteen. If twelve is also too difficult, then they may try eight and work up to twelve and then to sixteen.

b. The ratio, 5:5:5:5 or other similar equalized counts are also very effective. Beginners may find it easier to eliminate the final count of holding the lungs empty.

The aim of all breathing exercises is to establish a rhythmic, controlled breath.

Resisting the Impulse to Flee

For a reason no one has yet been able to determine, we often find that when we sit down to meditate our cushion turns into an ant hill. Chan beginners most frequently experience this mysterious cushion transformation but sooner or later it happens to us all. We begin to squirm and the only thing we can think about is getting away from that itchy place.

When we first sit down, we're full of good intentions. We plan to do a complete program - at least twenty breath-cycles. But then, after four or five cycles, we discover that we're sitting on an ant hill and have to cut our program short.

Sometimes there are no ants there. But all of a sudden we remember many important things that we've forgotten to do: straighten the books on the library shelf; purchase noodles for tomorrow's dinner; read yesterday's newspaper. Clearly, these things must be attended to and so, with great regret, we get up from our cushion.

Dear friends, how do we maintain our good intentions? How do we prevent our resolve from diminishing so drastically?

First we have to recognize how we are deceiving ourselves. You know, there is an old story in Chan about a rich man who contracted a disease and was in great jeopardy of dying. So he made a bargain with the Buddha Amitabha. "Spare my life, Lord" he said, "and I will sell my house and give the poor all the

proceeds from the sale." All of his family and friends heard him make this pledge. Then, miraculously, he began to recover. But as his condition improved, his resolve began to diminish; and by the time he was completely cured, he wondered why he had made such a pledge in the first place. But since everyone expected him to sell his house, he put it up for sale. In addition to the house, however, he sold his house-cat. He sold the house and cat for a total of ten thousand and one gold coins. But a promise is a promise, and so he gave one gold coin to the poor. That was what he sold the house for. The cat, you see, was a very valuable cat. When we don't want to do something, trivial things become very important. A house cat is worth ten thousand times as much as a house.

We should all remember this man whenever we get the urge to jump up from our cushion. We should all remember him whenever we suddenly decide to cut short our program. But if we do not excuse ourselves from performing our practice, neither should we remain on our cushion because of sense of duty.

Sometimes people act as if they are making a great sacrifice when they perform their meditation practice. "I'll do it and get it over with," they think. But this is not the proper attitude. The time we spend in meditation should be the most beautiful time of our day. We must cherish this time.

Dear friends, be grateful for the Buddha Dharma. Be grateful for the Three Treasures. Never forget that eternal refuge that exists for is all in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Be thankful for the Lamp that leads us out of darkness and into the light.

CHAPTER 8: PERSEVERANCE AND RESOURCEFULNESS

A warlord once stopped at a monastery on his way home from a successful military campaign. He came to visit the abbot who was an old teacher of his.

As the abbot and the warlord sat in the courtyard pleasantly chatting and drinking tea, they were distracted by an argument between a novice and a senior monk. The novice was complaining that the meditation technique given him by the senior monk was ineffective and worthless. "It cannot teach me how to concentrate much less meditate," shouted the novice. "Give me a more reliable technique."

Observing that the argument was distressing his old master, the warlord stood and said, "Please, Master, allow me to help this young man." When the master nodded his assent, the warlord summoned six of his archers.

The warlord then filled his teacup to the brim and carefully handed it to the novice. "Take this cup of tea," he ordered, "and without spilling a single drop, carry it around the entire periphery of this courtyard."

As the novice took the cup the warlord commanded his archers, "Follow him! If he spills a single drop, shoot him!" The archers drew their bows and began to walk beside the novice who, in the next twenty minutes, learned how to concentrate.

Dear Friends, there is no substitute for determination. Enlightenment is a serious matter. It can never be attained with a casual or lax attitude. You must be determined to succeed and you must be resourceful in your determination.

Strange to say, success in meditation has the same requirements as being a suspect in a crime: a person has to have motive, means and opportunity. It is not enough to have only one or two of these to be considered a criminal suspect. You must have all three: motive, means, and opportunity.

To help you understand this, I'll tell you several stories. The first story I personally witnessed:

In the year nineteen hundred, following the famous Boxer Rebellion against foreigners, eight foreign powers, provoked by the attack on their consulates, sent expeditionary forces to Beijing. The Manchu Emperor Guang Sui and Dowager Empress Zi Xi had supported the Boxers in their attacks on the foreigners, and so they naturally feared for their lives. In disguise, they fled from Beijing, seeking the safety of Shanxi Province. I was a member of their retinue.

Nobody was prepared for the journey. We had departed so suddenly and under such emergency conditions, that there had been no time to provision the trip. We had no food at all. We also had no horses or money.

As you can imagine, the situation was particularly difficult for the Imperial family. Not only had they never experienced hunger, but their every whim of appetite had always been satisfied by the finest delicacies. And of course, they never had to walk anywhere. Sedan chairs and carriages always kept their feet a good distance above the ground. And there they were... trying to pass for ordinary citizens!

The first day, we walked and walked and grew hungrier and hungrier, but the Imperial stables and kitchens were only a nagging memory.

Finally, exhausted and famished, we begged for food; and a peasant obliged us by giving us sweet potato vines and leaves, fare which normally is reserved for pigs.

Now, the Emperor, who was completely soft and spoiled, had never actually eaten pig food before; but because he was so hungry, he truly thought the vines and leaves were delicious. "What is this excellent food?" he asked; and he was certainly surprised to learn its identity. "More, more," he said, and he ate all he could with gusto.

We could not linger over this pleasant meal because, unfortunately, we were escaping from eight different armies. We had to "eat and run", as they say. Hurriedly we walked on.

So there was the mighty Emperor of China, who previously was carried everywhere he went and who never ate anything but the finest of gourmet dishes, jogging down the road and dining on animal fodder. I guess you could say he was getting in shape... mentally, too, because he lost all his Imperial airs and seemed to thrive in the simplicity and humility of the situation.

But what was it that motivated the Emperor to walk so fast and to enjoy eating such common food? And why did he discard his Imperial demeanor? I'll tell you: Eight foreign armies wanted to kill him and he knew it. He was running for his life and he suddenly developed a rather keen sense of what was important to that effort and what was not.

Later on, when peace was restored and the foreigners left and the Emperor and Dowager Empress were able at last to return to Beijing, he reverted to his old ways. He became the high and mighty lord again. Whenever he felt the slightest pang of hunger, he stuffed himself with delicacies; and of course he never

walked anywhere at all. When he was fleeing for his life, he was made of steel. But now he once again was soft and spoiled.

If he had applied the same determination to fleeing from the enemies of his spirit as he had shown when fleeing from the enemies of his flesh, was there anything in this world that he could not accomplish? Well, we all know what happened to the Manchu Dynasty.

Dear friends, the demons of sloth and pride and gluttony never negotiate peace. They are always at war. Only a fierce determination can subdue them. And subdued, they lie and wait for us to slacken in our resolve when, you may be sure, they will reappear at the earliest opportunity.

Determination and resourcefulness. These are indispensable. Never become slaves to convenience and comfort. Learn to adapt to whatever situation you find yourself in. Welcome hardship more than you welcome ease. Hardship will present you with challenges... and it is in overcoming these obstacles, that you will develop character and skill. Challenges are our greatest teachers.

Don't be afraid to fail. Just try and try again. There is an old saying that is worth remembering: Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment.

If you don't let failures defeat you, they will become the foundation upon which your success will securely rest.

Let me tell you about a humble man who acquired the unusual name, "Imperial Master Dragon Trousers".

Once upon a time - actually in the latter half of the Sixteenth Century - there was a poor and illiterate man who devoutly wished to be enlightened. He believed himself too wretched and unworthy to become a Buddhist monk but nevertheless he went to a monastery and asked to be permitted to work in the fields there.

Every day this humble man cheerfully worked from dawn to dusk. He was too shy to come forward and directly ask anyone for help. He simply hoped that by observing the monks, he would discover a method by which he could achieve enlightenment.

One day a visiting monk came to the monastery. This monk had reached a low-point in his spiritual life and was going around to various monasteries trying to find a way to renew his faith. He happened to notice the man working so cheerfully in the fields, and he marveled at the man's enthusiasm for hard work. Why did the man so enjoy life? What could his secret be?

And so the monk went to the man and with humility and admiration asked, "Sir, would you be kind enough to tell me your method? What practice do you follow?"

"I have no practice," said the man, "but I certainly would like to learn one. Venerable Master, would you be kind enough to give me some small instruction?"

The visiting monk saw the man's sincerity and humility and was quite moved by it. "You have done for me what many masters could not do," he said. And being truly inspired, he renewed his vow and his determination to gain enlightenment right there on the spot. Then he said to the man, "Although no instruction I could give you could ever be so valuable as the instruction you've given me by your own example, I'm delighted to offer you whatever advice I can. I suggest, Good Sir, that you strive to grasp the Hua Tou, "Amitabha! Who is it who now repeats the Buddha's name?"

All day long as he worked, the man pondered this Hua Tou. And then, when winter came and there was no more farm work for him to do, he retired to a mountain cave and continued to work on his Hua Tou. He made a bed of fragrant pine needles. For food, he gathered pine nuts and dug roots out of the earth. From clay he made himself a pot and after baking it in the fire, he was able to boil snow to make tea and soup.

Near his mountain cave there was a small village and as the winter wore on and the people used up their stores of food they began to come to him, begging for food. He gave them what he could and showed them where the best pine trees and roots were located, but many of them were too weak to look for food. Worse, in their hunger they had all become mean and selfish and uncooperative.

The man knew what to do. He made a large pot of clay and took it into the center of the village. Then he filled the pot with snow and lit a fire under it. Naturally all the villagers came out to see what he was doing.

"Today," he announced, "I will teach you how to make stone soup." Everyone laughed. It was not possible to make soup from stones. But the man selected several stones from the mountainside and after washing them carefully, he threw them in the pot. Then, from the pocket of his threadbare coat, he withdrew a few pine nuts and some dried roots.

One of the villagers said, "You'll need some salt for that soup."

"Ah," said the man, "I have no salt."

"I do," said the villager. "I'll run home and get it."

Another villager said, "You know, I just happen to have an old cabbage in my cellar. Would you like to include it in the soup?"

"Of course," said the man. "That would be wonderful!" And that villager ran home to fetch his old cabbage.

Another villager offered two shriveled carrots while yet another remembered an onion he had stored away. Handfuls of rice came from many households. A few more old vegetables, a little wild celery, a pinch of pepper, and then, to everyone's delight, the delicious smell of soup filled the air. People brought their bowls and ate with such joy! There was plenty of soup for everyone. "What a clever fellow," they all agreed, "to be able to make such fine soup from stones."

They thanked the man for his recipe, the main ingredients of which were love and generosity. Again the man returned to his cave and continued his work on the Hua Tou, "Amitabha! Who is it who now repeats the Buddha's name?"

He grew famous for being a sort of "stone soup chef"; and when his mother and sister heard about his marvelous power, they came to visit him, bringing an offering of a bolt of fine silk. But when they entered his cave, he was in deep samadhi, and he neither responded to their flattering remarks nor acknowledged their gift. Disappointed and angry, his mother and sister propped the bolt against the wall and departed.

For thirteen years he lived in that cave and at the end of that time, his mother died and his sister came alone to call on him. She was agitated and depressed and felt that life had no real meaning.

When she entered the cave she was astonished to find the bolt of silk propped up against the wall exactly where she had left it. "What secret power do you have that makes you so independent of the things of the world?" his sister asked.

"I have no secret power," he said. "I strive to live the life of the Buddha Self. I strive to live the Dharma."

That didn't seem to her to be much of an answer, and so she got up to leave. "Take this bolt of silk with you," he said. "Take also something which is far more valuable." And he gave her the precious Hua Tou instruction. "Every day, from morning to night, say to yourself, `Amitabha! Who is repeating the Buddha's name?'"

The Hua Tou immediately captured her attention. Even before she left she had begun to make spiritual progress with it. Her thoughts, instead of being scattered and agitated, suddenly settled down to focus on the Hua Tou. Instead

of being depressed and aimless, she became actively involved in solving the problem. She was concentrating on something besides her troubles.

The man, seeing how this method had so fascinated and delighted his sister, realized it was time for him to return to the world and to try to help people. He returned to the monastery where he had first worked in the fields and received ordination in the Dharma. But he declined to live at the monastery. Instead, he proceeded to Xia Men, a town on the south coast of FuJian Province, where he built himself a roadside hut. Everyday he gathered roots and wild vegetables and brewed a tea which he offered, without charge, to pilgrims and other travelers.

Whenever someone asked his advice about spiritual matters, he repeated the advice that had been given him by the visiting monk: he recommended that Hua Tou! Then, during the reign of Emperor Wan Li, the Empress Mother died, and the Emperor, grief stricken, planned a magnificent funeral ceremony, one that was worthy of her memory. But which priest was worthy of conducting the service? That was a problem! There is an old saying, "Familiarity breeds contempt," and the Emperor evidently knew the Buddhist priests in the capital too well. He didn't think that any of them was sufficiently saintly to conduct such a sacred service. Day after day he struggled with the problem of finding a suitable priest, and then, one night in a dream, his mother spoke to him. "In Chang Zhou prefecture of FuJian Province," she said, "there is a monk who is qualified to lead my funeral service." She gave him no other information.

Immediately, the Emperor dispatched government officials to FuJian Province to seek out the most holy monks. And the officials, being no better judge of holiness then than they are now, simply picked the most eminent monks they could find. Naturally, these monks were delighted to be selected for the honor and, naturally, the officials were delighted to have completed their assignment; and so a large group of very happy officials and monks started back for the capital. On the way, they stopped at the monk's hut for tea.

"Venerable Masters," said the monk, "Please tell me the reason you are all so happy."

One of the eminent priests couldn't resist bragging, "We're on our way to the capital to conduct funeral services for the Empress Mother."

This didn't seem like an occasion for joy to the monk. He respected the Emperor and the Empress Mother who were both devout Buddhists. "I would like to help you," he said, asking, "May I accompany you to the capital?"

All the officials and priests laughed at him for being such a rude fellow. Then the bragging priest asked incredulously, "Do you actually hope to help us conduct the services?"

"Oh, no," said the monk. "I merely wish to carry your luggage."

"That's better," said the priest. "Very well, you may come as our porter."

Meanwhile, the Emperor had devised a test for determining which priest of the many who had been summoned was worthy of leading the ceremony. He had the Diamond Sutra carved into a stone, and when he heard that the officials and priests were approaching the palace, he had that stone placed in the threshold of the Palace Gate.

Sadly the Emperor watched as, one by one, the officials and priests walked across the stone, chatting with each other about the different things they would do to make the ceremony more impressive.

The porter monk was the last monk to approach the stone. When he saw it, even though he could not read, he sensed that it was Holy Writ. He stopped and called to one of the priests, "What do these characters say?"

The priest turned around, looked down and read. "Why, it's the Diamond Sutra!" he said, surprised; but he kept on walking and chatting with the others. The monk, however, would not cross the threshold. Instead, he knelt before the stone, and remained outside the Palace gate.

The Emperor watched all this and then commanded the monk to enter.

"Sire," said the monk, "I am sorry to disobey you, but I cannot dishonor these sacred words by walking on them." "If you were reading the sutra, you could hold it in your hands without dishonoring it, couldn't you?" asked the Emperor.

"If I could read, Sire, I would not then be dishonoring the words by holding them in my hands."

The Emperor smiled. "Then cross the threshold by walking on your hands."

So the monk did a somersault and entered the Palace by having only his hands touch the stone.

The Emperor then decreed that this humble monk should lead the funeral ceremony. But when the Emperor asked the monk how he intended to proceed, the monk merely replied, "I will conduct the ceremony tomorrow morning. I will require one small altar, one processional banner, some incense, candles and offertory fruit."

This was not the grand ceremony the Emperor had in mind. So, prompted by the grumblings of the eminent priests, he began to doubt his decision to allow the monk to conduct the services. Immediately he devised another test. He ordered two of his most beautiful and experienced concubines to go to the monk's chambers and assist him in his ablutions for the ceremony.

And that evening, by Imperial command, these two women came to the monk and proceeded to bathe and massage him; but though they used the most sensuous unguents and perfumes and did everything they knew how to do to arouse him sexually, he remained unmoved by their efforts. When they were finished, he politely thanked them for their kind assistance and bid them good night. The women reported this to the Emperor who was much relieved. He ordered that the ceremony be held in accordance with the monk's design.

During the ceremony, the monk went to the coffin of the Empress Mother and said, "See me, dear Lady, as your own Original Face. Know that in reality there are not two of us but only one. Though there is naught to lead and naught to follow, please accept my direction and take one step forward to enter Paradise."

The Emperor overheard this and was again dismayed by the simplicity of the address. "Is that enough to liberate Her Majesty, the Empress Mother?" he asked. But before the monk could answer, the Empress Mother's voice, sounding a little annoyed, resounded throughout the Palace. "I am now liberated, my son! Bow your head and give thanks to this holy master!"

The Emperor was stunned, but so happy to hear his mother's voice that he beamed with joy. Immediately he ordered a banquet to be held in the monk's honor.

At that banquet something strange occurred. The Emperor appeared in magnificent attire and when the monk saw the Emperor's trousers, which were richly embroidered with golden sky dragons, he was struck by their beauty. The Emperor saw him staring at his trousers and said, "Virtuous One! Do you like these trousers?"

"Yes, Sire," answered the monk. "I think they are very bright and very beautiful. They shine like lamps."

"The better for people to follow you," said the Emperor; and right on the spot he took off his pants and gave them to the monk! Thereafter, the monk was known as "Imperial Master Dragon Trousers".

I tell you this wonderful story because I want you always to remember those Dragon Trousers and the persevering monk who received them. Dear friends, imagine that you, too, are wearing those bright trousers and be a lamp unto the feet of others, a gleaming light which they may follow. Always

remember, that just as that monk so quickly noticed the Emperor's trousers, others will be noticing you. Do not yield to temptation or distraction. Always keep your Hua Tou in your mind. Never be parted from it. It will become the source of your resourcefulness. And, just as you should always help others, you should never allow yourself to become helpless.

Remember: motive, means, and opportunity. Retain your motivation! Seek the means of enlightenment! Find the opportunity to practice! Then, when someone asks, "Who is guilty of success in Chan?" you can say, "I am."

CHAPTER 9: WORDLESS TRANSMISSION

Stay with Chan! This is the most efficient way to attain enlightenment. Don't allow yourself to be tempted into adopting other methods.

Even Yong Jia, by his own admission, wasted a lot of time with intellectual philosophizing before he tried the Chan method with Patriarch Hui Neng. "In my youth," he said, "I studied sutras and shastras and commentaries trying endlessly to discriminate between name and form. I might as well have tried to count sand grains in the ocean. I had forgotten the Buddha's question, `Does a man who counts other men's gems get any richer?'"

The Chan method is truly like the Vajra King's sword. In one stroke it can cut through illusion to reach Buddhahood.

Whenever I think about the years of practice that often precede enlightenment's momentary experience, I think about Chan Master Shen Zan. We can all learn a lot from him.

Shen Zan had a master who unfortunately was not enlightened. One cannot give what one does not own; and so, empty handed, Shen Zan left his old master in order to go and study with Master Bai Zhang.

Now, under Master Bai Zhang's guidance, Shen Zan attained enlightenment and then, with fond respect, he went back to visit his old teacher.

The old man asked him, "What did you learn after you left me?" And because he was enlightened, Shen Zan was able to reply kindly, "Nothing, absolutely nothing." To the old man, this was bittersweet news. He was sorry that his student hadn't learned anything, but he was happy to have him back. "If you want, you can stay here," he said.

So Shen Zan stayed and served his old master.

One day, while taking a bath, the old man asked Shen Zan to scrub his back which was very dirty. As Shen Zan began to scrub he said, "Such funny crystal windows in your Buddha Hall." His master didn't know what he meant. "Please explain your remark," he asked.

As Shen Zan continued to scrub away the dirt, he said, "Although you can't see in, your Buddha Self sends out such illuminating rays." This answer puzzled the master.

A few days later, as the old master sat under a waxed- paper window studying a sutra, a bee began to buzz around the room; and the bee, drawn to the outside light, kept crashing into the window paper, trying to get out of the room. Shen Zan watched the frustrated bee and said, "So you want to get out and enter the infinity of space! Well, you won't do it by penetrating old paper..." Then he said simply, "The door stands open but the bee refuses to go through it. See how it knocks its head against the shut window. Foolish Bee! When will it understand that the Way is blocked by paper?"

Now a glimmer of light began to penetrate the teacher's mind. He sensed the deeper meaning of Shen Zan's words. Slyly he asked, "You were gone for a long time. Are you sure you didn't learn anything while you were away?"

Shen Zan laughed and confessed, "After I left you, I studied under master Bai Zhang. Through him I learned how to halt my discriminating mind... to cease being judgmental... to transcend the ego's world. Through him I attained the Holy Fruit of enlightenment."

Now, when the old master heard this wonderful news, he assembled all the monks and ordered that a banquet be prepared in Shen Zan's honor. He was so happy. "Please allow your old master to become your student," he asked Shen Zan. "Please expound the Dharma to me... especially that business about the baths and bees."

Shen Zan laughed. "Your Buddha Self shines out from you even though you can't see it for yourself. It is always pure and no amount of dirt can ever soil it. Also, your eyes are always turned outwards, fixed on printed pages; but Infinity cannot be captured in words. Books only engage us in debates. If you want to be free from illusion, you must look inwards. The Way into Infinity is on the other side of your gaze. Look inward to see your shining Buddha Self!"

Suddenly the old teacher understood! Suddenly he saw into his own Buddha Nature! He got so excited that he declared that Shen Zan would be the Abbot of the monastery. "Who would have believed that in my old age I finally would have made it across?" he shouted.

But that's what's so nice about the Eternal Moment, isn't it? Step outside of time just once, and all the years you spent in ignorance and suffering recede into vagueness. They're only something you seem to remember. Your old small self is gone and all his old enemies and friends and relatives and all his old experiences, bitter or sweet, have lost their power over him. They were like a cinema show... believable while he was in the theater, but not when he came out into the daylight. Reality dispelled the illusion.

In Nirvana you're neither young nor old. You just are. And who are you? That's easy. The Buddha.

CHAPTER 10: LAYMAN PANG

Sometimes ordinary folks get the idea that the meaning of Chan is so profound that only men and women who've been ordained in the Dharma can possibly fathom it. But that's just not so. Actually, we priests often feel that we're in way over our heads. And every now and then, while we splash about, trying to look good treading water in our nice uniforms, along comes a civilian who zips by us, swimming like an Olympic champion. Such a civilian was Layman Pang. He would have won Chan's gold medal. He's been a hero not only to centuries worth of other laymen, but also, I confess, to every priest who's ever studied his winning style.

Layman Pang lived during the latter half of the Eighth Century, a golden age for Chan. He was an educated family man - he had a wife and a son and daughter - and was well-enough off financially to be able to devote his time to Buddhist studies.

He got the idea that a person needed solitude in order to meditate and ponder the Dharma, so he built himself a little one-room monastery near his family home. Every day he went there to study and practice.

His wife, son and daughter studied the Dharma, too; but they stayed in the family house, conducting their business and doing their chores, incorporating Buddhism into their daily lives.

Layman Pang had submerged himself in the sutras and one day he found that he, too, was in over his head. He hadn't learned to swim yet. On that day, he stormed out of his monastery-hut and, in abject frustration, complained to his wife, "Difficult! Difficult! Difficult! Trying to grasp so many facts is like trying to store sesame seeds in the leaves of a tree top!"

His wife retorted, "Easy! Easy! Easy! You've been studying words, but I study the grass and find the Buddha Self reflected in every drop of dew."

Now, Layman Pang's daughter, Ling Zhao, was listening to this verbal splashing, so she went swimming by. "Two old people foolishly chattering!" she called.

"Just a minute!" shouted Layman Pang. "If you're so smart, tell us your method."

Ling Zhao returned to her parents and said gently, "It's not difficult, and it's not easy. When I'm hungry, I eat. When I'm tired, I sleep."

Ling Zhao had mastered Natural Chan.

Layman Pang learned a lot that day. He understood so much that he put away his books, locked his little monastery-hut, and decided to visit different Chan masters to test his understanding. He still couldn't compete against his own daughter, but he was getting pretty good.

Eventually he wound up at Nan Yue Mountain where Master Shi Tou had a monastic retreat. Layman Pang went directly to the master and asked, "Where can I find a man who's unattached to material things?" Master Shi Tou slowly raised his hand and closed Pang's mouth. In that one gesture, Pang's Chan really deepened. He stayed at Nan Yueh for many months.

All the monks there watched him and became quite curious about his Natural Chan, his perfect equanimity. Even Master Shi Tou was moved to ask him what his secret was. "Everyone marvels at your methods," said Shi Tou. "Tell me. Do you have any special powers?"

Layman Pang just smiled and said, "No, no special powers. My day is filled with humble activities and I just keep my mind in harmony with my tasks. I accept what comes without desire or aversion. When encountering other people, I maintain an uncritical attitude, never admiring, never condemning. To me, red is red and not crimson or scarlet. So, what marvelous method do I use? Well, when I chop wood, I chop wood; and when I carry water, I carry water."

Master Shi Tou was understandably impressed by this response. He wanted Pang to join his Sangha. "A fellow like you shouldn't remain a layman," said Shi Tou. "Why don't you shave your head and become a monk?"

The proposition signaled the end of Pang's sojourn with Shi Tou. Clearly, he could learn no more from this master. Pang responded with a simple remark. "I'll do what I'll do," and what he did was leave.

He next showed up at the doorstep of the formidable Master Ma Zu. Again he asked the master, "Where can I find a man who's unattached to material things?" Ma Tzu frowned and replied, "I'll tell you after you've swallowed West River in one gulp."

In grasping that one remark, Pang was able to complete his enlightenment. He saw that Uncritical Mind was not enough. His mind had to become as immense as Buddha Mind; it had to encompass all Samsara and Nirvana, to expand into Infinity's Void. Such a mind could swallow the Pacific.

Layman Pang stayed with Master Ma Zu until he discovered one day that he had no more to learn from him, either. On that particular occasion, Pang

approached Ma Zu and, standing over him, said, "An enlightened fellow asks you to look up." Ma Zu deliberately looked straight down. Layman Pang sighed, "How beautifully you play the stringless lute!"

At this point, Ma Zu had confirmed that there was no difference between human beings, that they were truly one and the same individual. As Pang had looked down, Ma Zu would look down. There was no one else to look up. But then, unaccountably, Ma Zu looked straight up and broke the spell, so to speak. So Layman Pang bowed low and remained in that obeisance of finality as Ma Zu rose and began to walk away. As the Master brushed past him, the Layman whispered, "Bungled it, didn't you... trying to be clever."

Layman Pang had attained mastery and every master he encountered acknowledged this. But what is evident to a master is not always evident to an ordinary monk. One winter day, while Pang was leaving the monastery of Master Yao Shan, some young monks, who were disdainful of his status as a mere layman, accompanied him to the front door. When Pang looked outside, he saw that it was snowing. "Good snow!" he said. "The flakes do not fall elsewhere." A monk named Quan, who was as impudent as he was stupid, completely missed the wit in Pang's remark. He mocked the Layman, asking sarcastically, "Where did you expect the flakes to fall?"

Now, Pang was good naturedly complimenting the snow for not falling in the kitchen or the meditation hall, that is to say, for falling where snow was supposed to fall - in the courtyard and fields, on the trees and roads. Pang knew that he would have to walk a long distance in that bitterly cold snow, and he had accepted that fact without distress.

But Pang not only had the wisdom of a master, he had the temper, too. When he saw the sneer on the young monk's face, he struck him.

"How dare you!" said the monk.

"And you're an ordained monk?" asked Pang incredulously. "Why, you'd be rejected at Hell's gates!"

"Just what do you mean by that?" demanded the monk.

Pang struck him again. "I mean that though you have eyes, ears and tongue, you're absolutely blind, deaf, and dumb." Then he calmly went out into the snow as if it were just so much sunshine. He had given the monk quite a lesson.

But usually he was extremely kind and patient with those he instructed.

One day, as he listened to a man who was trying to explain the Diamond Sutra, he noticed that the fellow was struggling with the meaning of a line that dealt with the nonexistence of the ego personality. "Perhaps I can help you," Pang said. "Do you understand that that which is conditional and changing is not real and that which is unconditional and immutable is real?"

"Yes," replied the commentator.

"Then is it not true that egos are conditional and changing, that no ego is the same from one minute to the next? Is it not true that with each passing minute, depending on circumstances and conditions, we acquire new information and new experiences just as we forget old information and experiences?

"Yes," agreed the commentator.

"But what is there about us that is unconditional and unchanging? asked Pang.

"Our common Buddha Nature!" replied the commentator, suddenly smiling, suddenly understanding. "That alone is real! The rest is mere illusion!" He was so happy that he inspired Pang to write him a poem: Since there is neither ego nor personality Who is distant and who is close? Take my advice and quit talking about reality. Experience it directly, for yourself. The nature of the Diamond Wisdom Is truth in all its singular purity. Fictitious egos can't divide or soil it. The expressions, "I hear," "I believe," "I understand," Are simply expedient expressions Tools in the diamond-cutter's hands. When the work's done, he puts them down.

Layman Pang and his daughter Ling Zhao traveled around China meeting their expenses by selling bamboo articles they made. They grew old together, becoming legends of enlightenment. Their last residence was a mountain cave.

Pang knew that it was time for him to lay his burden down. He was very tired and could not go on. Inside the cave there was one particular rock that he always sat on when meditating; so he took his seat and, intending to pass away when the sun was directly overhead, he sent Ling Zhao outside to watch for the moment that noon had come. In a few minutes, however, Ling Zhao returned to the cave breathless with excitement. "Oh, Father," she shouted, "you must come outside and see this! There's been an eclipse of the sun!"

Well, this was an extraordinary occurrence if ever there was one. Pang could not resist having a look at it. So he rose from his meditation rock and went outside. He looked and looked but there was no eclipse. Noon had come, that was all. But where was Ling Zhao? Pang returned to the cave and found her dead, her body sitting upright on his meditation rock. "Oh, that girl!" cried Pang. "She always was ahead of me."

He buried her and then, a week later, he, too, entered Nirvana. His body was cremated and the ashes scattered on the waters of a nearby lake.

CHAPTER 11: THE DAO IMMORTAL

Forty-three generations of Chan masters have passed since the Sixth Patriarch held high the Dharma Lamp. Forty-three generations of seekers have found the Way, guided by his Light.

No matter how confirmed a person is in another Path, he can be guided by Chan. When sunlight comes through the window, it does not illuminate some sections of the room while leaving other parts in darkness. The entire room is lit by the Sun's Truth. So, any person, no matter which Path he has chosen, can receive the benefits of Chan's Lamp.

Take the famous case of the Dao Immortal Lu Dong Bin.

Lu Dong Bin was the youngest and most unrestrained of all the Dao Immortals. Actually, you could say that he was pretty wild. At least that's how he started out.

In his mortal days, he was called Chun Yang... a native of Jing Chuan who lived at the end of the T'ang Dynasty. That was more than a thousand years ago, but those days weren't so different from ours. If a young man wanted to get ahead, he needed an education. In our time, he'd get a college degree. But in those days, he had to pass the dreaded Scholar's Examination. If a fellow couldn't pass this exam, he had to give some serious thought to farming.

Well, Chun Yang tried three times to pass the Scholar's Examination, and three times he failed. He was frustrated and depressed. He knew he had let his family down, and that he hadn't done much for himself, either. It was his own professional future that he had doomed.

So Chun Yang did what a lot of desperate young people do, he started hanging out in wine-shops trying to drink himself to death.

The path that alcohol takes went in the same direction for Chun Yang as it does for anyone else: it went straight down. As the old saying goes, first Shun Yung was drinking the wine, then the wine was drinking the wine, and then the wine was drinking Shun Yung. He was in pretty bad shape by the time the Dao Immortal, Zhong Li Quan, chanced to meet him in one of those saloons.

The Dao Immortal took an interest in the young man. "Instead of trying to shorten your life with wine," he said, "why don't you try to lengthen your life with Dao."

Instead of a short, miserable life, Zhong Li Quan offered Chun Yang a long, happy life. It sounded like a good deal. Chun Yang might not have had what it took to be a government bureaucrat, but he certainly had everything required to try spiritual alchemy.

Chun Yang had nothing else to do with his time so he had plenty of opportunity to practice. He was definitely motivated. I suppose that he had become aware of how far down he had gone, that he'd hit bottom, so to speak. When a person realizes that he doesn't have anything to lose by looking at life from another point of view, he's more open to new ideas.

So Chun Yang had the motivation and the opportunity. It only remained to acquire the means. And that was what Zhong Li Quan was offering to supply. He'd teach him the necessary techniques.

Chun Yang threw his heart and soul into the mastery of what is called the Small Cosmic Orbit, a powerful yoga practice that uses sexual energy to transmute the dross of human nature into the Gold of Immortality. He got so good at it he could make himself invisible or appear in two places at once.... That's pretty good.

One day he decided to fly over Chan Monastery Hai Hui which was situated on Lu Shan mountain. Saints and Immortals can do that, you know. They're like pilots without airplanes... or parachutes.

While he was flying around up there, he saw and heard the Buddhist monks chanting and working hard doing all the ordinary things that Buddhist monks do. So, to show off his powers and mock the monks' industry, he wrote a little poem on the wall of the monastery's bell tower:

With Jewel inside my Hara's treasure,
Every truth becomes my pleasure.
When day is done I can relax
My Mind's without a care to tax.
Your mindless Chan a purpose lacks.

Some such bad poetry like that. Then he flew away. Every day that the Abbot, Chan Master Huang Lung, looked up at the bell tower he had to read that awful poetry.

One day while the former Chun Yang - he was now known as the Immortal Lu Dong Bin - was flying around the vicinity of the monastery he saw a purple umbrella-shaped cloud rising over the monastery. This was a clear indication that something very spiritual was going on and so Lu Dong Bin thought he'd come down and take a look.

All the monks were going into the Dharma Hall so he just disguised himself as a monk and followed them in. But he couldn't fool old Abbot Huang Lung.

"I don't think I'll expound the Dharma, today," growled Huang Lung. "We seem to have a Dharma Thief in our midst."

Lu Dong Bin stepped forward and arrogantly bowed to the Master. "Would you be kind enough," he challenged sarcastically, "to enlighten me to the meaning of the expression, `A grain of wheat can contain the universe and mountains and rivers can fit into a small cooking pot.'" Lu Dong Bin didn't believe in the empty, egoless state. He accepted the false view that the ego somehow survives death.

Huang Lung laughed at him. "Look! A devil guards a corpse!"

"A corpse?" Lu Tun Pin retorted. "Hah! My gourd is filled with the Elixir of Immortality!"

"You can drag your corpse throughout eternity for all I care," said Huang Lung. "But for now, get it out of here!"

"Can't you answer my question?" taunted Lu Dong Bin.

"I thought you had all the answers you needed," Huang Lung scoffed. He remembered the poem.

Lu Dong Bin responded with fury. He hurled his dreaded sword, the "Devil Slayer", at Huang Lung; but the Master merely pointed his finger at the flying sword and it stopped in mid-flight and dropped harmlessly to the floor. The Immortal was awestruck! He had never imagined a Chan master could be so powerful. Contrite, he dropped to his knees in a show of respect. "Please, master," he said, "I truly do wish to understand."

Huang Lung softened towards him. "Let's forget the second part about the cooking pot," he said generously. "Instead, concentrate on the first part. The same mind that gives form to an arrangement of matter which it names `a grain of wheat' is the same mind that gives form to an arrangement of matter which it names `a universe'. Concepts are in the mind. `Mindless Chan,' as you previously put it, is actually the practice of emptying the mind of concepts, of judgments, of opinions, of ego." Then he added, remembering the poem probably, "Especially the concept of ego!"

Lu Dong Bin brooded about the answer until he suddenly understood it. As long as he discriminated between himself and others, between desirable and undesirable, between insignificant and important, he was enslaved to the

conceptual world, he was merely an Arbiter of Illusions. Nobody in his right mind wants to be that! And certainly no Dao Immortal wants to spend his life, or all eternity, either, judging between lies, deciding which ones are more convincing than others.

Overjoyed, Lu Dong Bin flew up to the tower, erased his old poem and substituted another:

> I thought I'd mastered my small mind,
> But t'was the other way around.
> I sought for gold in mercury
> But illusion's all I found.
> My sword came crashing to the floor
> When Huang Lung pointed at the moon;
> I saw the light, his truth broke through
> And saved me none too soon.

Unfortunately, Enlightenment didn't make him a better poet.

The point, however, is that Lu Dong Bin, despite being a Dao Immortal, was able to benefit from Chan. He so appreciated the Three Jewels - Buddha, Dharma, Sangha - that he actually acquired the title of Guardian of the Dharma. Of course, it wasn't necessary for him to convert and call himself a Chan Man. The whole lesson of his Enlightenment was that names are meaningless, so he continued being a Dao Immortal. Only now, because he understood so much more, he immediately rose through the ranks of the Immortals; and though he was the youngest of them all, he became the most prominent. Under his inspired leadership, the Daoist Sect in the North really began to thrive. Lu Dong Bin was called the Fifth Dao Patriarch of the North.

Down South, another great Daoist, Zi Yang, also attained Enlightenment after reading Buddhist sutras. He became known as the Fifth Dao Patriarch of the South ... but that's another story.

CHAPTER 12: MO SHAN

Many women have excelled in the practice of Chan. Many have attained mastery and some of these have, in fact, succeeded where eminent male masters have failed.

Take the case of Master Mo Shan. In the habit of many masters, Mo Shan took her name from the mountain on which her monastery was situated. She became quite famous for the depth of her understanding of Chan and her ability to lead students to enlightenment.

The monk Quan Xi, who would later become Chan Master Quan Xi, had heard about the success of her methods; and after having spent a few years with none other than Master Lin Ji - years in which he learned much but was not delivered to enlightenment, Quan Xi decided to visit Mo Shan to see if her methods could help him.

I suppose that Quan Xi had fallen victim to the kind of pride that infects many students of great masters. They think that it is better to be an unenlightened disciple of a famous master than it is to be an enlightened disciple of an unknown one. Some feel the same way about gender. They suppose that an unenlightened male student is superior to an enlightened female master. You could call this Chan Machismo.

At any rate, student monk Quan Xi showed up at Mo Shan's monastery with a chip on his shoulder. He was cavalier and condescending and very mindful that he was a superior male Chan practitioner. He didn't rear up and beat his chest and bellow in the manner of male apes, but he came close to it.

Quan Xi entered the hall just as Mo Shan was taking her customary high seat of authority. He should have kowtowed to her as a supplicant and begged her to take him on as a student; but he just couldn't humble himself before a woman.

Mo Shan studied him for a moment, then she called to an attendant, "Is this fellow a sightseer or a student applicant?"

Quan Xi spoke up: "I am not a tourist. I am a follower of the Buddha Dharma."

"Ah," said Mo Shan, trying to look surprised. "You follow the Dharma! Tell me, how did you get here?"

"I walked in, from the main road."

"Did you think you left the Dharma back there on the road, that it couldn't be followed here or found here?"

Quan Xi didn't know what to say. He made a halfway sort of kneeling obeisance, more to cover his confusion than to show his respect.

Mo Shan was hardly satisfied by this compromised arrogance. "The Dharmakaya doesn't have boundaries that you can draw to suit your conceits," she said. "As the Dharmakaya is everywhere, so also are the rules, the Law, the Buddha Dharma. You shall conform your demeanor to accepted standards. You shall meet this condition."

Grudgingly Quan Xi kowtowed to Mo Shan. But when he rose, he couldn't resist asking, "What is the condition of the head of Mo Shan?" He was sparring with her verbally. What he wanted to know was whether or not she was enlightened.

Mo Shan smiled at his impertinence. "Which of the Buddha's disciples could see his usnisa, the sacred bulge at the top of his head?" She meant, of course, that it takes one to know one; and if Quan Xi could not see that she was enlightened it was because he, himself, was not.

"Where can I find the man who's in charge of Mo Shan?" he retorted condescendingly, with the double meaning "woman" and "mountain monastery".

"The One in charge of Mo Shan is neither man nor woman," she replied, giving him a little more rope.

"The person in charge ought to be powerful enough to complete the transformation," he challenged, his machismo again getting the better of his brain.

Mo Shan looked intently at Quan Xi. Slowly and gently she said, "The One in charge of Mo Shan is neither a ghost nor a demon nor a person. Into what should that One transform?"

Quan Xi suddenly got the message! For a moment he stood there horror struck by his own audacious ignorance. Then he dropped to his knees and really kowtowed to Mo Shan. This time he meant it.

He stayed on at Mo Shan Monastery for three years working as a gardener. Under Master Mo Shan's guidance, he attained enlightenment.

Years later, when he had become a master and had his own disciples, he used to tell them, "Enlightenment requires a full measure from the Great Dipper. From my spiritual father, Lin Ji, I received only half a ladle. It was my spiritual mother, Mo Shan, who gave me the other half; and from the time that she gave it to me, I have never been thirsty."

CHAPTER 13: CONCLUSION

The ancients had the same problems with time that we have. They said, "Days pass like a shuttle in a loom." First one way, then the other way. Back and forth, side to side. Sometimes they said, "Days pass like arrows overhead." We stand there and watch them fly by, wondering where they're all going.

In a Chan teaching session, the instruction period passes quickly. Like time, ideas and opinions go this way and that. On which side will the thread end? Arrows of insight fly overhead. Will any strike its target? We won't know until the great reckoning at the end of the teaching session.

In Chan, as in most things in life, we're never sure we understand something we've just been taught until we've been tested. Teachers call this testing, "Paying the check." On the last day of the teaching session, all of the students are assembled and the teacher randomly calls on this person, then that person, on and on, asking all sorts of pointed questions. That's what we call presenting a student with the check. He has to get up in front of the entire class and submit to the interrogation. "How much did you learn? Pay up!" Teachers get paid with good answers.

Of course, in any session, if even one person manages to attain Enlightenment, he pays the check for everybody. All share the joy when someone succeeds in attaining Truth.

So what did you learn from these lessons? Maybe you paid the check for everybody and attained Enlightenment. Maybe you're not sure and need a little time to think about it, to mull these Chan ideas over in your mind, to let the thoughts settle a bit before you see what you've got. Take all the time you need - just don't cease the mulling process. Keep Chan in your mind. Redefine your priorities. Cultivate patience.

One summer day the Buddha decided to take a long walk. He strolled down the road alone, just enjoying the earth's beauty. Then, at a crossroad, he came upon a man who was praying.

The man, recognizing the Tathagata, knelt before him and cried, "Lord, life is indeed bitter and painful! I was once happy and prosperous, but through trickery and deceit those I loved took everything from me. I am rejected and scorned. Tell me, Lord," he asked, "how many times must I be reborn into such wretched existence before I finally know the bliss of Nirvana?"

The Buddha looked around and saw a mango tree. "Do you see that tree?" he asked. The man nodded. Then the Buddha said, "Before you know freedom from sorrow you must be reborn as many times as there are mangoes on that tree."

Now, the mango tree was in full fruit and dozens of mangoes hung from it. The man gasped. "But Lord," he protested, "I have kept your Precepts! I have lived righteously! Why must I be condemned to suffer so much longer?"

The Buddha sighed. "Because that is how it must be." And he continued his walk.

He came to another crossroad and found another man praying; and this man, too, knelt before him. "Lord, life is indeed bitter and painful," the man said. "I have known such anguish. As a boy, I lost my parents; as a man, I lost my wife and pretty children. How many times must I be reborn into such wretched existence before I come finally to know the refuge of your love?"

The Buddha looked around and saw a field of wild flowers. "Do you see that field of wild flowers?" he asked. The man nodded. Then the Buddha said, "Before you know freedom from sorrow, you must be reborn as many times as there are blossoms in that field."

Seeing so many hundreds of flowers, the man cried, "But Lord! I have been a good person. I have always been honest and fair, never harming anyone! Why must I be made to endure so much more suffering?"

The Buddha sighed. "Because that is how it must be," and he continued on his way.

At the next crossroad, he met yet another man who knelt before him in supplication. "Lord, life is indeed bitter and painful!" the man said. "Days toiling under the burning sun, nights lying on the cold, wet earth. So much hunger and thirst and loneliness! How many more times must I be reborn into such wretched existence before I may walk with you in Paradise?"

The Buddha looked around and saw a tamarind tree. Now, each branch of the tamarind has many stems and each stem has dozens of little leaves. "Do you see that tamarind tree?" the Buddha asked. The man nodded. Then the Buddha said, "Before you know freedom from sorrow you must be reborn as many times as there are leaves on that tamarind tree."

The man looked at the tamarind and its thousands of leaves, and his eyes filled with tears of gratitude. "How merciful is my Lord!" he said, and he pressed his forehead to the ground before the Buddha's feet.

And the Buddha said, "Arise, my good friend. Come with me now."

And to this day the tamarind's seeds are the symbol of faithfulness and forbearance.

We cannot enter into contracts with the universe. We cannot say, "I obeyed the rules and therefore I'm entitled to receive benefits." or "I've put up with more than my share of hard luck. I'm due some good luck, now." The universe doesn't recognize our petty claims for justice. There are heroes who laid down their lives for the benefit of others. They have no voice to complain. Yet we know that because they were selfless, they walk in Paradise.

And isn't this the way to happiness? Isn't this how we enter Nirvana? By losing our individual egos and gaining the universal Buddha Self? Paradise comes when we surrender ourselves to it.

So when you are asked, "How much did you learn?" even if you can't come up with specific answers, you'll pay your check if you just say, "However long it takes, I'll stick with Chan. I'll keep trying to rid myself of selfishness and to never forget to keep my forehead pressed to the ground before the Buddha's feet."

Humility and patience are golden coins.

And here's a tip: Try to find a Buddha in every man you meet and you may pay the check for thousands.

When it comes to love, be a big spender!



Master Xu (Hsu) Yun